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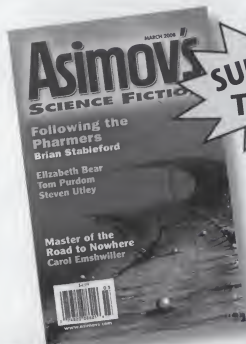
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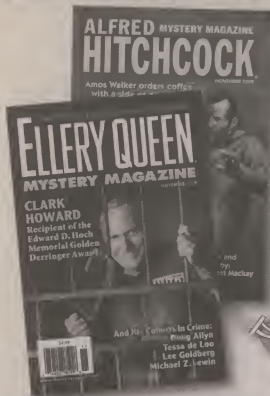
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FEBRUARY 2010

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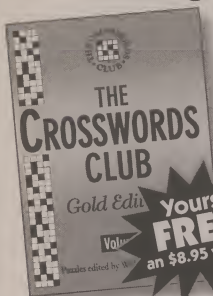
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## AFFECTING ETERNITY

When I landed my job as editorial assistant as *Asimov's*, I felt a bit like a skydiver who had managed to set down on a precipice. Thankfully, more experienced hands reached out to steady me, so that the wind couldn't blow me off my perch. Over the course of my career I've amassed debts of gratitude to many people, but the two who grounded me most in those early days were Betsy Mitchell and Eleanor Sullivan.

Both women were colleagues of mine at Davis Publications. Betsy's name may be familiar to very long-time readers of *Asimov's* and certainly will be to those who know the names of the editors behind the books at the big SF publishing houses. Betsy had already worked as a journalist and as a copywriter at Dell Books before she became an editorial assistant on both *Analog* and *Asimov's* in late 1980. By the time I joined the magazine, she was the managing editor of *Analog* and the associate editor of *Asimov's*. Betsy's job at *Analog* was demanding and time consuming. Her duties at *Asimov's* were primarily to train me. It was a joy to be taught by someone as even-tempered and as much fun as Betsy. Due to our workload, I often had to operate on my own, and it seemed as though I was destined to make every possible mistake at least once. I can still see her standing in my doorway cheerfully delivering horrifying news about the very first issue of *Asimov's* to carry my name. In proofing the magazine, I hadn't noticed that some of the galleys for a nonfiction column had been pasted up out of order. Betsy's patience and good humor helped me learn from these mistakes without being humiliated and ensured that they were never repeated. Her own name came off the masthead when mine went on, but her help and encouragement lasted for months afterward.

I'd been flying solo for a while when

Betsy announced that she was leaving the magazines to help Jim Baen start up his brand new publishing company, Baen Books. I was heartbroken to see her go, but my loss was science fiction's gain. Betsy eventually moved from Baen Books to Bantam Spectra where she was named associate publisher. At Spectra, she edited the Hugo Award-winner *Hyperion* by Dan Simmons and *Virtual Light* by William Gibson. Later, she founded the Aspect line at Warner Books. One of her goals at Aspect was to focus on the work of writers of color. Nalo Hopkinson, whose *Brown Girl in the Ring* won Aspect's initial first-novel contest, was one of her discoveries. Betsy was the publisher of the World Fantasy Award winning *Dark Matter*, the first-ever anthology of speculative fiction by black writers. She is now the Vice President/Editor-in-Chief of Del Rey Books where, in addition to editing such writers as Michael Chabon, Terry Brooks, and Naomi Novik, she publishes Del Rey Manga and graphic novels.

While I was learning how to produce a magazine from Betsy, I was learning about the life of an editor from Eleanor Sullivan, the editor of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. Eleanor was about twenty-five years older than I and was much more sophisticated. She was blonde and the first person I'd ever met who always wore black. Eleanor lived in a large duplex apartment on East 48<sup>th</sup> Street. She knew everyone. Her neighbor was Katherine Hepburn and her close friends included Judith Crist, Ruth Rendell, and Phyllis Diller. Eleanor invited me to her home and took me out to places like Applause, a restaurant where every so often the wait staff would leave off serving drinks and dinner to break into song and dance routines. Although she was a very private person, she told me wonderful stories about her life and about publishing.

She had worked as an elementary school teacher for ten years before joining the staff of *Ellery Queen* in 1970, and she was the editor of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* from 1975 until 1981. Eleanor worked closely with Fred Dannay, the editor and one half of the team of cousins that made up the *Ellery Queen* pseudonym. The editorship of his magazine was passed to Eleanor when he died.

At Davis, we could take calls after hours by intercepting the night bell. Once, I took a call from a woman with a familiar voice. It was the actress Loretta Swit and she wanted to give Eleanor two tickets to that evening's Broadway performance of *Edwin Drood*. I wasn't sure if my life would be worth less if I lost Eleanor a shot at the tickets or if I gave out her home number. As I dithered, Loretta sweetly asked me if it would help if she told Eleanor I'd been very difficult. With great relief, I said that would be lovely and passed along the information.

Though a mystery editor might seem to have a tenuous connection to science fiction, it was another of Eleanor's friendships that brought about the existence of this very magazine. Since Fred Dannay worked mostly from his home, Eleanor had held down the fort at the New York office. Isaac Asimov loved visiting with her and as a result he submitted all his *Black Widower* and *Union Club* mystery stories in person. It was because of these visits that our publisher, Joel Davis, got to know Isaac and eventually asked him if he could attach the *Good Doctor's* name to a science fiction magazine.

Eleanor died almost twenty years ago, but I think of her when I hang ornaments from her on my Christmas tree or when my kids complain that I wear too much black. While our busy lives don't allow us to see that much of each other, Betsy Mitchell has remained my friend for all these years. These two women who helped shape me also shaped our world. In an alternate universe that is without Betsy Mitchell, the SF field looks completely different from the one we know. And without an Eleanor Sullivan, there is no *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine. ○

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## REREADING CLARKE

The merits of most of the science fiction of Arthur C. Clarke have largely escaped me. There is no denying the overwhelming visionary fertility of his imagination—he exceeds all others in his ability to show us the wonders of the as yet uncharted realms of space and time—and some of his short stories are superb. But the big, bland novels that repeatedly put him on the best-seller lists—the *Rendezvous with Rama* books, *Imperial Earth*, 2001 and its various sequels, et cetera, have always struck me, despite their passages of great conceptual inventiveness, as dull, slow, and passionless. That they should have enjoyed such great commercial success and gobbled up so many Hugo and Nebula awards left me baffled.

In my first few years as a science fiction reader, though, when everything was new and wondrous for me and I had not yet come to judge what I read with the eye of a fellow practitioner of the craft, Clarke's earliest published fiction had a powerful impact on me—such stories as "Loophole" and "Rescue Party," and the short novel *Against the Fall of Night*, all of which I read when I was thirteen or fourteen. So I decided, for this series of essays on rereading my early SF favorites, to see what it was that I had found so marvelous in Clarke's first novel when I encountered it more than sixty years ago.

As it happened, the edition of *Against the Fall of Night* that I took down from the shelf also contained a novella, "The Lion of Comarre," that first appeared in the pulp magazine *Thrilling Wonder Stories* in the summer of 1949, when I was barely into my teens. I remembered that one fondly, too; and so I began my Clarke research with it now.

It turned out to have its moments, but I found it mainly to be simple, innocent

stuff. Though I don't know when Clarke wrote it, I suspect that the first draft, at least, dates from the mid-1930s, when Clarke was barely out of his teens himself. The story opens with a page-long historical lecture of the sort favored by writers in Hugo Gernsback's pioneering SF magazines of that long-ago era:

"Toward the close of the twenty-sixth century, the great tide of Science had at last begun to ebb. The long series of inventions that had shaped and molded the world for nearly a thousand years was coming to its end. Everything had been discovered. One by one, all the great dreams of the past had become reality.

"Civilization was completely mechanized—yet machinery had almost vanished. Hidden in the walls of the cities or buried far underground, the perfect machines bore the burdens of the world. . . ."

And so on for quite a while until we meet our protagonist, Richard Peyton III, a young man who remains little more than a name to us as we follow his adventures for the next fifteen or twenty thousand words. Restless in Earth's utopian tranquility, he goes off in quest of the legendary lost city of Comarre, locates it with the greatest of ease, and wanders around amongst the smoothly purring machines that are its only inhabitants until he succeeds in stumbling upon knowledge that he may be able to use in breaking the world out of its long cultural stagnation. The action, such as it is, moves by fits and starts, and is frequently interrupted by more dollops of history ("The First Electronic Age, Peyton knew, had begun in 1908, more than eleven centuries before, with De Forest's invention of the triode. . . .") Though the young Clarke does foreshadow the concept we speak of today as the Singularity—artificial intelligence capable of out-



stripping our own—the level of inventiveness throughout is a low one: AD 2600 has “personal communicators” instead of telephones, windows have panes of “glassite” instead of glass, the World Council’s chamber has a roof of “crystallite,” people use “writing machines” instead of typewriters or computers, and so on: all of these are just science fiction noises, rather than genuine efforts of the imagination.

The story, then, seems primitive. How much more deftly Robert A. Heinlein, who in 1940 almost singlehandedly made the Gernsback school of storytelling obsolete, would have imparted all the information that Clarke is content simply to shovel at us! How much more cunningly Henry Kuttner, the cleverest storyteller of his generation, would have shaped the story: the opening hook leading to some paradoxical conflict, *then* the history lesson, then the dramatic tour of mysterious Comarre and the world-changing resolution of the main plot problem. I see what stirred me about “The Lion of Comarre” back in 1949, when my primary concern as an uncritical reader was to extract visions of the unknowable future from a story, rather than to be carried along by a swiftly unfolding plot. It was the sense of *futureness* it offered me then. But I doubt that readers of today would have much patience with the story.

*Against the Fall of Night*, a far more interesting work, has some of the same drawbacks. But those are greatly outweighed by its virtues, which are the virtues of the clear-eyed innocence of its young author. What seemed primitive and clunky in “The Lion of Comarre” becomes oddly moving in the thematically related longer story.

There’s no question that this one was a child of the Gernsback era. Clarke himself has written that he began it about 1936, the last of the Gernsback years, and went on tinkering with it until 1940, by which time it had reached a length of fifteen thousand words. After the war he returned to it, finishing a novel-length draft by January 1946, and submitted it

to John W. Campbell, who rejected it and then rejected a rewritten version six months later. (Campbell may have been annoyed by Clarke’s notion of Earth conquered by superior alien forces, a concept that ran counter to Campbell’s editorial prejudices.) At the time, there was only one other market for science fiction of that length, the pulp magazine *Startling Stories*, which ran a long novella in every issue. It appeared in the November 1948 *Startling*, and I read it there in a second-hand copy that I found about six months later.

What captivated me then, and still does, was its setting in the extremely distant future—a billion and a half years hence, in this case. Ever since H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* took me to the end of the universe when I was ten years old I have had an insatiable love for the sub-genre of science fiction that deals with the far future: S. Fowler Wright’s *The World Below*, Jack Vance’s *The Dying Earth*, Brian Aldiss’s *The Long Afternoon of Earth*, and many another. I have even offered my own contribution to the field in the novel *Son of Man*. None of these books pretends to offer an accurate description of the farthest reaches of time; nobody can write a really plausible story about so remote a period, or even about the world of just a couple of centuries ahead of ours. These stories are only visions, dreams, fantasies, poems.

Probably the greatest of far-future fables is Olaf Stapledon’s *Last and First Men* (1930), which I discussed in these pages last year. Clarke, in a 1967 introduction to *Against the Fall of Night*, makes it clear that that book was the primary influence on his. He was thirteen when he read it, and, he says, “With its multimillion-year vistas, and the roll call of great but doomed civilizations, the book produced an overwhelming impact on me. I can still remember patiently copying Stapledon’s ‘Time Scales’—up to the last one, where ‘Planets Formed’ and ‘End of Man’ lie only a fraction of an inch on either side of the moment marked ‘Today.’”

*Against the Fall of Night* is the young Arthur Clarke's homage to Stapledon. It tells of a far-future Earth that long ago lost its interstellar empire to a race of invincible conquerors, and now is a desert planet, where the last humans, a passive, reclusive, culturally stagnant race of immortals, live out their days barricaded in the fortress city of Diaspar. No child had been born in Diaspar for seven thousand years until the coming of Clarke's protagonist, the boy Alvin, who has the hungry curiosity of youth. Alvin finds his way out of Diaspar and makes a series of discoveries that eventually, as we see in a frantic flurry of revelations in the last few pages of the book, utterly upset all of Diaspar's notions about the last billion or so years of Earth's history.

The tale is slowly and clumsily told. Mostly we see the events through Alvin's eyes, but gradually a few other characters, dimly individualized, enter the tale, and Clarke shifts the viewpoint to them whenever he needs to introduce some plot point not readily accessible to Alvin. The style is simple, even artless. ("Not for three years did Rorden make more than casual reference to the purpose of their work. The time had passed quickly enough, for there was so much to learn and the knowledge that his goal was not unattainable gave Alvin patience. . . .") The pace of biological evolution seems to have come to a halt: though Clarke blithely tells us of events and characters twenty and fifty and a hundred million years prior to his story, Alvin and his companions seem not very different physically or mentally from humans of our sort, nor is their technology significantly advanced beyond ours. It is a pleasant, charming book, but it shows an amateur's grasp of storytelling technique: Clarke describes one event, and another, and another, and finally the door is open to his climactic revelations and we are shown them, in a hasty, almost perfunctory way, and that is that. Clarke seems to have been aware of the book's naïveté, because he recast it totally for

the 1956 novel *The City and the Stars*, embodying its plot in a much larger and far more complex work.

Even so, I found *Against the Fall of Night* enthralling when I was a boy, and readable enough even now. I think that word *amateur* that I used a few lines back explains its power, and, in fact, the success of all of Clarke's fiction over the following decades.

*Amateur* may be a startling word to apply to so famous and widely read a novelist as Arthur C. Clarke. But it has two meanings, one of which has largely been eclipsed in modern-day English. When applied to writers we generally take it to describe a not-quite-competent practitioner: someone who has not mastered the tricks of the storytelling trade, the array of technical devices that professional writers use to draw readers into a story and hold them there. I think that's true of Clarke: from beginning to end of his career, he told his stories quietly, simply, relying entirely on the strength of his ideas and the steady, gentle tone of his voice to keep readers interested. For the most part, it worked.

But the earlier sense of *amateur* derives from the Latin word *amator*, a lover—specifically, a lover of literature, of fine wine, of rare postage stamps, of anything that can excite strong commitment, be it intellectual or emotional or both. We no longer use the word that way in English because, since it has come to take on negative connotations in its other sense, it has been replaced by its Spanish synonym, *aficionado*. But those of us who love science fiction are *amateurs* of science fiction, and I think there was no greater amateur of SF than Arthur C. Clarke, who when he was eighteen or so set out to show his love for the work of Olaf Stapledon and other SF visionaries by writing his own tale of the far future. And it is that love that shines through in *Against the Fall of Night* and most of Clarke's later work and makes it compelling to us despite all its literary shortcomings. ○

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Caroline M. Yoachim lives in Austin, Texas, with her husband and her newborn baby. Caroline began writing fiction in 2005, and in 2006 she attended the Clarion West Writer's Workshop. Since that time, her stories have appeared in *Fantasy Magazine*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Shimmer*, *Talebones*, and *Electric Velocipede*. In addition to writing fiction, the author also enjoys photography, graphic design, cooking, and yoga. For more details, check out her website at: [carolineyoachim.com](http://carolineyoachim.com). In her first story for *Asimov's*, Caroline takes us to a cruel and disturbing future and exposes us to the brutal beauty of the . . .

# STONE WALL TRUTH

Caroline M. Yoachim

Njeri sewed the woman together with hairs from a zebra tail. Her deer-bone needle dipped under the woman's skin and bobbed back out. The contrast of the white seams against her dark skin was striking.

"The center seam makes a straight line," Njeri told her apprentice, "but the others flow with the natural curves of the body, just as the Enshai River follows the curve of the landscape."

Odion leaned in to examine her work, his breath warm on the back of her neck. Foolish boy, wasting his attention on her. Njeri set her needle on the table and stood up to stretch. The job was nearly done—she'd repositioned the woman's organs, reconstructed her muscles, sewn her body back together. Only the face was still open, facial muscles splayed out in all directions from the woman's skull like an exotic flower in full bloom.

"Why sew them back together, after the wall?" Odion asked. "Why not let them die?"

Njeri sighed. The boy had steady hands and a sharp mind, but his heart was unforgiving. He had been eager to learn about the cutting, about the delicate art of preparing a patient to hang from the wall. What he questioned was the sewing, the part of the work that had drawn Njeri to this calling. She studied the woman on the table—the last surviving grandchild of Radmalende, who had been king when the country was ruled by kings instead of warlords. The two of them had come of age the same spring, and had taken their adulthood rites together. That had been many years ago, but it was hard for Njeri not to think of her childhood friend by name. "You think I should leave her to die?"

"Her bones were black as obsidian." He traced the center seam with his finger.

Njeri said nothing. She admired the woman for her strength; she hadn't cried or protested or made excuses. Few women were put on the wall, but this one had faced

it as bravely as any man, braver than some. And her shadowself had been like nothing Njeri had ever seen. Dark, of course, but a tightly controlled blackness, an army of ants marching out from her heart and along her bones. A constantly shifting shadow that never rested too long in any one place.

"She made a play for the throne. Killed six Maiwatu guardsmen in the process. Her attack has opened the way for the Upyatu. I heard a rumor today the capital is still under siege." Odion masked the worry in his voice, but Njeri knew he was concerned. He had many friends in the upper echelons of the ruling class—it was how he came to be apprenticed to the highest ranking surgeon at the longest stretch of wall.

"There is always unrest in the capital." Njeri didn't add that this woman had a stronger claim to the citrine throne than most. "Besides, it's not our place to say what people deserve. General Bahtir pays us to take people apart and put them back together, not to judge them."

Njeri nudged Odion aside. She settled back onto her stool, and he went outside to set some water boiling for tea. He didn't appreciate being pushed away, didn't understand why she didn't want him the way he wanted her. She wanted to tell the boy to find someone his own age, someone who *liked* boys, but Odion wouldn't listen. Njeri returned to her work. The woman's jawbone hung slack below her skull, but her mouth still closed around the clear stone that held her mind while Njeri patched her body together. The woman's eyes stared up at the thatched straw roof, empty, with nothing but bone surrounding them. Flayed open, everyone looked wide-eyed and afraid. Njeri visualized how her muscles should fit together to recreate her strong chin and high cheekbones.

"Ever wonder what you'd look like on the wall?"

Njeri tensed at the interruption, then relaxed. Odion knew better than to startle her while she sewed, but she hadn't taken up the needle yet. The boy was certainly persistent in seeking her attention. She considered his question. The work she did was good, healing those who came off the wall, but she had her share of secrets, her share of shame. Life demanded dark things sometimes, she didn't need the wall to tell her that. What would her balance be? She hoped the good in her would be enough to cancel out the darkness, but she could not say for sure.

"I do," Odion said, finally. "Wonder, I mean. I've never seen anyone clean—not on the smaller wall in Zwibe, and not here."

"True, that." Njeri picked up her needle, ending the conversation, and began to reconnect the muscles of the woman's mouth. She stitched the entire face together without taking a break, though, by the end, her fingers ached.

When the sewing was finished, Njeri made Odion examine her work. It served two purposes. First, it was good for the boy to learn the ritual of checking and rechecking before the patient was restored to consciousness. Ripping out seams already sewn was a tedious process, but a mistake caught now could be corrected. After the mindstone was removed, however, mistakes meant pain and often death. She had to train the boy to be observant, to notice the slightest error. Second, of course, was that Odion's eyes and hands were fresh—he was more likely to catch a mistake if she'd made one.

Odion ran his fingertips up the seam of the woman's left arm, then down the seam of her right. His touch was firm enough to feel both the surface seam and the muscles underneath, allowing him to test the depth of the stitches. He tested the woman's legs, her chest, and finally her face. He didn't speak as he worked.

"Flawless," he said. "You never make mistakes."

"I'm well-practiced now," Njeri answered. "I made my mistakes before your time."

She laid her fingers on the cool flesh at the base of the woman's neck. Odion might be more likely to catch a mistake, but that did not relieve Njeri of her obligation to check her own work. She pressed her fingers along the center seam, sliding her hand

between the woman's breasts and over the gentle rounding of her belly. Her body was softer than Njeri's, an alluring contrast to the fierceness she had shown in facing the wall. Where Njeri was lean and angular, this woman was feminine and curved. Njeri lost her place and had to backtrack her pattern along the seams.

"Did I miss something?" Odion asked, frowning. He placed his hand over Njeri's.

"No," Njeri said. She moved her hand away and finished tracing the seams.

Confident that she had made no errors, Njeri slipped her thumb and index finger into the woman's mouth, which was dry and cool, preserved in a state of half-life. She grasped the mindstone and pulled it free. The woman's muscles tensed, then relaxed.

Odion held out a cup of hibiscus mint tea, but Njeri waved it away. Too soon. The woman's eyes were closed; she wasn't ready to face the world. She remained motionless, as though the stone was still in her mouth. Even her breath was shallow, as though she begrudged the rising and falling of her chest.

Odion shifted his weight from foot to foot, refusing to be still. Patience was not a virtue he possessed. Perhaps the young were never patient. Njeri had not been, when she was Odion's age. Noticing her attention, Odion thrust the cup forward again. Njeri took it.

The woman's eyes opened, clear and dark.

"The light of the wall shines upon us and reveals our shadows," Njeri said. "Its light is the gift of a race long gone from this earth. You have faced the wall and returned. Speak your name and you may go."

These were the ritual words that Talib had taught her, when she was in training. There was a falseness to them, for no patient was ever ready to leave so soon after being awakened, and none saw their ordeal as a gift. But the speaking of names was good, for it confirmed that the mind had returned from the stone. A name provided continuity between time before the wall and time afterwards.

"Kanika." Her voice was breathy and weak. Odion pulled her shoulders up and pushed a wedge of bundled straw behind her back so she could sit. Njeri tipped the cup against Kanika's lips, slowly pouring tea into her mouth. For every sip she swallowed, two spilled down her neck and over her chest. Njeri gave the empty cup to Odion to refill it.

"My son?" Kanika asked. "Bahtir's men came for my son."

General Bahtir put only his most powerful enemies on the wall, for fear that if he killed them they would curse him from the Valley of the Dead. A child, even one with royal ancestry, did not pose enough of a threat to be spared.

Odion returned with more tea. "Drink," he said, pressing the cup into Kanika's hands. Njeri reached to take it from her, but she clutched the carved wood in her fingers and drained the cup.

"I remember," she said, "I feel myself open on the wall. Like looking in from the outside."

Her hands shook. Had there been any tea left, it would have sloshed over the sides. "So much darkness I never knew was there, and my son is dead by now, because I couldn't protect him. I failed him. You should have killed me. There's nothing left of me worth saving."

Njeri took the cup. She wanted to cradle Kanika in her arms and comfort her, but she had to act as a surgeon, not as a friend. She searched for something she could do to ease Kanika's pain. The stone that had held Kanika's mind still sat beside her on the table. Rainbows swirled beneath the clear surface of the smooth stone. It was a relic of the Ancients, made from the same glassy material as the wall.

"Here." Njeri picked up the mindstone and pressed it into Kanika's hand. "To remind you that there is light inside you, too. The colors in this stone are the echoes of your mind."

"There are not so many stones that we can give them freely," Odion said. He scowled at Njeri. "You're treating her differently because she's a woman, because you knew her before the wall."

There was truth to that, but Njeri did not retract her offer. Kanika stared into the stone. "So pretty. Light without shadows. I could swallow it, and drift away from my pain."

"You would have no way to return, if you changed your mind," Njeri said.

Kanika smiled, but her eyes were sad. "I speak of escape, but that has never been my way, you know that. Holding life at such a distance would be like not living at all, too big a price to pay."

Odion reached for the mindstone, to take it from her, but she closed her fingers over it.

"I may not be able to use the stone," she told him, "but I cannot give it up. It is my light, and I carry much darkness."

Heat rose from the cracked-mud earth. The stars winked in and out of existence at the edge of Njeri's senses, their light distorted by miles of wavering sky. Beyond the thatched rooftops of the village, rolling hills of dry grass stretched into the darkness. Kanika leaned against Njeri as they walked across the village to the healer's hut.

"I wish I could go home," Kanika said. "I want to pull into myself and sleep. I feel like I could sleep forever."

"Your punishment is ended. You could leave for home tomorrow, if you wished," Njeri said, but she hoped that Kanika would stay.

"Ended? The wall was the worst, Njeri, but my punishment will last until I die. Anyone who sees my skin will know that I hung on the wall. Do you think people will forgive me? Embrace me into their lives?"

"Any man worth having would want you still," Njeri said. "Or any woman."

Njeri couldn't read Kanika's expression. Was there interest there?

"You don't know what it's like to be up on the wall. The things I saw . . ." Kanika brought her hand to her heart, digging her fingers into the fabric of her shirt to press against the seams in her skin.

"Dreams from the mindstone. Many of my patients have spoken of such visions."

"No. There is only truth on the wall," Kanika said. "I thought, before I went on the wall, that I wouldn't have shadows. But I was only adding self-deception and arrogance to the list of my flaws." Her words came in a steady stream, with only the barest pauses for breath. "No one can understand me, not with these scars. Not because of how I look, but because I know my shadowself."

Kanika fell silent as they approached a cluster of Bahtir's guardsmen. Normally they patrolled the periphery of the village in pairs, so it was unusual to see them gathered in the road. Several men shook their shields, zebraskins stretched taut over oval frames. Strands of human teeth hung below and rattled as the shields moved. One man ran his fingers over the tigers-eye clasp that held his threadbare orange cloak closed, and another tapped the butt of his spear against the dirt. The guardsmen were on edge tonight.

One of the men stepped forward to stop the women, then recognized Njeri and saw Kanika's scars. He signaled to the others, and the entire group turned and headed back toward the guardhouse, a large clay-brick building at the outskirts of the village. When they had gone, Kanika pulled out her mindstone. In the moonlight there were no rain-bows, only swirls of a silvery blue. "This is what I thought I was. I was so foolish."

"That is as much a part of you as the shadows are," Njeri said.

"We all have darkness," Kanika said.

Njeri had heard this from many of her patients. It was a source of great comfort



for them to think that they were not alone in having shadows. Sometimes Njeri wondered if there was truth in their assertion. There was no way to know; the innocent weren't sentenced to hang on the wall. "You've lived your life well, despite your darkness. Doesn't that give you some comfort?"

"No, don't you see? We all have darkness. *All of us*," Kanika pulled away. "The wall is pointless. You torture people for no purpose."

Kanika took a few steps, then stumbled. Njeri caught her. Her skin was moist with sweat—heat and exertion were taking their toll. "The wall is about revealing a person's darkest truth. If they see their darkness, they can fight it. The knowledge can heal them." "It destroys them. It destroys me. And you condemn people to this torture."

"I am the hands that do the work," Njeri said. "I don't decide who faces the wall."

Kanika tried to pull away a second time, but she was too weak. "You pass judgment every time you open someone onto the wall. Don't pass the responsibility to someone else. We all judge, and we all mete out our punishments. You saw how all the guardsmen fled at the sight of me."

"Superstitious fools," Njeri said.

They walked in silence to Durratse's door. Njeri knew the old healer well, for he had cared for her for several months after her mother died. She watched carefully for his reaction when he opened his door. He hid his revulsion well, but she could see the slight flare of his nostrils, the falseness in his smile. She wondered how she'd failed to notice it with the other patients she'd brought him. Or perhaps he'd been more forgiving of the men.

"We all judge," Kanika repeated.

Durratse led Kanika inside. It was late, so he did not invite Njeri in. He simply nodded his head and closed the door.

The roughly hewn wood of the door had shrunk with weather and age, and she could still see them through the gaps in the wood. She wanted to argue with Kanika, to defend herself. Kanika insisted on focusing on the worst of the wall, the worst of her, the cutting. Like Odion, she paid no mind to the important work of sewing. She healed people, just as Durratse did, and her patients needed more healing than anyone.

When Njeri went out to stoke her cooking fire shortly after sunrise, the village was bustling with unfamiliar guardsmen. The new arrivals were Upyatu—a tall people, with broad flat feet. She watched them as she boiled plantains for breakfast. They were more boisterous than Bahtir's men; they spoke in loud voices punctuated with barking laughter. Their heads were covered with elaborate beaded headdresses, and their shields were round and crimson. It could mean only one thing. The capital had fallen.

Njeri pounded the boiled plantains into mash. It made little difference to her, the struggle for power. One general was replaced by another, but they all wanted the same work done. She wished for peace not out of support for any current ruler, but because in times of war she had to put more people to the wall. She took her mash back to the hut, where Odion was waiting.

"The new general brought two prisoners for the wall," he said, speaking quickly. "He wants to hang them together."

Njeri divided the mash into two bowls and topped each one with slices of green mango. How could Odion be excited about such a thing? The Maiwatu were his people. Besides, to put criminals on the wall was one thing, but to leave one there for the time it took to flay a second was cruel. Dissecting them simultaneously, but slowly, would be no better. "Cruelty. Already I dislike the man."

Odion stirred his mash. "I thought, with two men, I might be charged with opening one of them."

"We have but one obsidian blade," Njeri said, "and the new general will want the

services of a surgeon, not an apprentice. I will open them, and you will assist, as we have always done."

A guardsman came to fetch them before they'd finished their morning meal. He was paler even than Odion, with a reddish tint to his skin, like dry dusty earth. Shorter, too, than most Upyatu warriors, and injured. Njeri could just make out the outlines of a bandage beneath the guardsman's tightly fitted leather tunic.

"General Yafeu commands your presence," the guardsman's voice was nasal, and far higher pitched than Njeri expected. Not a man at all, but a woman with her breasts bound. The warrior laughed at Njeri's surprise. "Call me Zola, and a woman. Bahtir would not allow women in the fight, he wanted them only for his bed. Yafeu is better. With him I can show my strength in both places."

Zola grinned at Odion, exposing teeth sharpened into points. Her stare had an animal quality to it, something almost predatory. Judging from his reluctance to meet the woman's stare, Odion did not find her aggression appealing. Njeri didn't like it either; Zola had a showiness about her that was distinctly off-putting. Not like Kani-ka's understated strength.

Njeri took up her obsidian blade, protected in its leather sheath. "The general will set us to work immediately then?"

"In a land where power shifts like flowing water, there is no later. Everything worth doing is worth doing now." Zola glanced again at Odion, but again he gave her no response. She shrugged and led them to the guardhouse. A pair of goats were tethered outside, undoubtedly part of her payment for serving the new general.

Before they entered, Zola tapped the door three times with one end of her bow, announcing their arrival to those inside. The guardhouse looked the same as it always had. Sleeping bunks lined the walls, and supplies were stacked in neat piles beneath and around the beds. Only the occupants had changed, the Maiwatu guardsmen replaced by the Upyatu.

General Yafeu sat atop a makeshift throne at the back of the room. He was a young man, barely older than Odion, and he had surrounded himself with female guardsmen. His guards were in full uniform, but the general's chest was bare except for a piece of vibrant yellow citrine that hung on a leather cord. It was carved into the shape of a lion's head, reminiscent of the decorations on the citrine throne in the capital. Two other stones hung from his belt, Bahtir's tiger-eye and the rose quartz of Bahtir's predecessor. At the base of Yafeu's throne were two men, bound and gagged. Njeri was unsurprised to see that Bahtir was one of the prisoners. The other was a man she did not recognize.

Zola stood to the left side of the general's throne and whispered something into his ear.

"So you are the Surgeon of Stonewall," Yafeu said.

"Yes," she replied, "and this is my apprentice." She did not bother with her name, or Odion's, for Yafeu had the look of a man who cared not about such things.

"And the wall will show these men for the evil creatures they are?" Yafeu asked, gesturing at his prisoners and curling his lips as though the very thought of them repulsed him.

"The wall reveals the innermost secrets of our nature," Njeri replied. "Those placed on the wall can hide nothing."

Odion stepped forward. "If they have shadow in them, the wall will expose it."

Njeri resisted the urge to rebuke her apprentice, but only because she didn't wish to fight in front of the general. It was not his place to speak in this situation, and it diminished Njeri that he would misbehave like this.

General Yafeu laughed. "I like this apprentice of yours. He shows spirit, and a willingness to please."

Njeri forced herself to nod and smile, even as Yafeu let his gaze linger on her apprentice. The general's words held the promise of intimacy that Odion had long sought with Njeri, and the boy was lonely enough that he might be swayed by the man's attention. She would have to be careful.

A guardsman entered without knocking and knelt, with his head bowed, in the center of the room. He was coated in sweat and dirt, and panted as though he had run the entire way from the capital.

"Go." Yafeu waved them away. "I will send you the prisoners when I'm finished here, and you can begin your work."

The wall was three times as tall as Njeri, and thicker than the length of her arm. It stretched twice the length of the village, winding east into the hills like a crystal snake. The morning sun glinted bright off the stones, if they could really be called stones. The wall was made from blocks as clear as glass, irregularly shaped but fit together so seamlessly that there was no need for mortar. According to Talib, the wall had once enclosed the entire nation of the Ancients. The fragments that remained were laid roughly in a circle, with the capital in the center.

"The stone wall," Yafeu said. "It's more impressive than the pitiful fragment in Zwibe. Though neither looks anything like stone."

Odion showed no reaction to the mention of his home village. Instead, he answered the unasked question in Yafeu's comment. "They call it the stone wall because people used to throw stones at the condemned while they hung. You can see the cracks where rocks flew wide of their targets."

"The practice was discarded centuries ago," Njeri added, before Yafeu got any ideas. "You can see how damaging it was to the wall."

Njeri did not mention that it also damaged the people that hung on the wall, making it impossible to sew them back together. General Yafeu shrugged, then waved his hand at the guardsmen. The two prisoners were marched out to stand before the wall. Njeri pressed her palm to the forehead of each man in a silent blessing. It was ironic that Bahtir, who had once feared the ghosts of the valley, now received a blessing that asked those same ghosts to protect him.

"Don't do this," Bahtir pleaded. She had heard such pleas before, many times, but never from a man who had ordered others onto the wall. The former general had always seemed so brave, but that had been an illusion of his power. Now that he had no power, he had no courage.

Njeri brushed her fingertips against the icy surface of the two mindstones in her pocket. She wondered if she would be brave, in Bahtir's place. She liked to think that she would be, knowing that the wall revealed only the truth—nothing more and nothing less. Kanika had been brave. The thought of her called back her assertion that Njeri had been wrong to put people on the wall. Did these men deserve such punishment? It wasn't her place to decide, it couldn't be. Her job was to cut and to sew.

Odion paced in the periphery of her vision.

She put a mindstone into the mouth of the older man first, and left him on the ground at the base of the wall. She moved on to Bahtir. Two guardsmen held him in place, one gripping each of his arms. She slid the glassy stone between his lips, and the life flowed out of his body. The guardsmen held him against the wall, and she pinned him there, driving shards of amethyst through the nine sacred points—palms and feet, hips and shoulders, and the final point through the nook at the base of his throat. The amethyst penetrated through his flesh, just until the tips touched the wall, and yet the attraction between the lavender shards and the clear stone held Bahtir firmly. His head drooped as though he bowed it in remorse, but once he was

opened, smaller amethyst pins would hold the muscles of his face, and his head would no longer hang.

Odion handed her the obsidian blade. Like the wall itself, the blade came from an older time. Mbenu, who made tools for the village, could knap a blade from obsidian, but his tools did not have the power of the Ancients in them. This blade slipped between the cells, and Njeri had learned through many years of training to trace the exact paths that would peel a man open without spilling a drop of blood.

Her first cut sliced only skin, beginning at the top of Bahtir's forehead and moving down the midline, over his nose, and to his lips. There she paused and traced the outline of his mouth with the blade before picking up the midline once more. Chin, neck, chest, groin, all without a drop of blood. The only loss was a strand of his hair that grew exactly on the midline. Sliced away by her blade, it fell to the base of the wall.

She sliced down the inner edge of each leg to the ankle, then drew the blade around to the front of each foot and into a gentle curve to the tip of the middle toe, completing the first vertical sequence. After that came a series of horizontal lines, branching out from the center. One cut along each arm, branching into five lines at the fingers. Evenly spaced cuts along the torso and legs so the skin would lie flat against the wall. Last, a series of lines radiating out from the center of his face, so that it would open like an exploding sun.

Light streamed through his skin. Any darkness on his surface was artificial, a trick of the eyes and not an indication of his being. On the wall, skin of every color let the same amount of light pass through. Njeri passed her blade to Odion and wiped the sweat from her face.

When she looked up, she saw Kanika, standing on the hillside, one face among many watchers. She stood near the top of the hill with the people of Stonewall, all of them staying as far from the wall as possible. The villagers had seen this many times, and attended now only because the general demanded it. A foolish demand, Njeri realized, for even if no one watched, the shame of these men would be forever sewn onto the surface of their skin. No army would follow a sewn general.

Everyone on the hill judged these men. All except Kanika. She was there to judge Njeri, and simply by having begun the flaying, she had failed. Standing at her side, Odion held the obsidian blade lightly, as though it was made of air from the night sky. When she took it from him the weight of it pulled her down toward the earth. She had to ease the burden on her heart; she had to prove that Bahtir deserved this punishment. Instead of moving on to the next man, Njeri stayed with the former general, peeling away the muscles to get down to his bones.

She placed the tip of the blade on Bahtir's breastbone, and leaned into it with all her weight. His breastbone split in two. She pried his ribcage open and revealed his shadows. They crawled like slugs from the core of his being, leaving trails of black slime behind them. This was her vindication, her proof that the punishment was just—but it was a hollow victory.

Njeri could feel the eyes of every man, woman, and child on the hillside, boring into the back of her neck. They looked at Bahtir, not at her, but she felt as though she was the one whose heart was exposed. She wanted to throw down her blade, or smash it to slivers against the wall.

The sunlight that passed through the wall cast no shadows. Even the stones that were flawed with a spiderweb pattern of cracks—scars from poorly aimed rocks of generations past—even those stones contained no darkness. Those imperfections on the wall simply broke the light into rainbows. It was a mockery of mankind. A mockery of Bahtir, whose shadowed heart was exposed for all to see.

Judging from the sun, it was mid-afternoon now, and a plate of untouched food sat behind her. Odion must have offered it, but she did not remember waving it off. The

boy stepped forward and sprinkled water on Bahtir's body to keep the tissue from drying out. When he finished, he came to her and put his hand on her shoulder. He could see that she was suffering, and Njeri knew he would gladly take over her task.

The second man lay unconscious in the dirt, his mind still locked away in stone. He was older, his hair a pale gray, almost white in the bright glare of the wall. Njeri could see the outline of his bones; he was underfed, or ill, or both.

Njeri didn't know the man's name.

Two guardsmen held his limp body against the wall and Njeri pinned him into place. She raised her blade, holding it at the man's head, at the starting point for the series of incisions she had made a hundred times before. It didn't matter that the man was old. It didn't matter that she didn't know who he was or what he had done. She had opened Kanika, she could do this.

"Do you tire?" Odion whispered when the pause grew too long. "I can bear this burden for you."

Njeri could not pass the blade to her apprentice, not at this moment, not in this way. Not even if the boy was ready, which Njeri doubted. This was a decision she had to make, to cut or not to cut. If she couldn't open this man, it meant that Kanika had been right—that in thinking it was not her place to pass judgment, she had been judging just the same. The blade quivered in her hand, and a droplet of blood appeared on the man's forehead.

"Give me the blade," Odion said, holding out his hand.

"No," Njeri said. This was her duty, and had been for many years. She could not escape from this, not now, not ever. To fail in her duty would be an act against General Yafeu. She could feel his gaze boring into her from the hillside, waiting, judging, finding her wanting.

"What is the delay?" General Yafeu called out. "Your task is not yet finished, woman."

"Who is this man?" Njeri asked. "What is his crime?"

"That is no business of yours." Yafeu's voice held amusement. He found this entertaining. Like a circus act, or a play. This was the man who Njeri had trusted to pass judgment. If she had believed herself unfit to decide the fate of others, surely this man was worse. Which made Njeri worse for having accepted his orders.

Njeri couldn't do it. She couldn't open this man that she didn't even know. She tore an amethyst pin out of his hand and reached for the one in his shoulder. Guardsmen rushed in to restrain her, and she put up no fight. The obsidian blade was taken from her.

"Open him," Yafeu said, speaking to Odion.

"No!" Njeri cried. "Please, let him go."

"At last, a statement with conviction." Yafeu smiled. "Will you take his place, then? Do you believe so strongly in this man that you would face the wall instead of him?"

Njeri knew her motives weren't pure. She wanted to save the man, yes, but not for his sake. She wanted to save him to make up for all the times she'd cut people open blindly. She wanted to make amends for opening Kanika without even asking of her crime. But surely it was better to do the right thing for the wrong reason than to not do it at all.

Odion stood before her. His eyes brimmed with tears. He had wanted to prove himself today, but not this way. Even with all his impatience and ambition, he still loved her. There was hope for him yet.

"Yes," Njeri said. "I will take the man's place."

"Pin her up," the general ordered. "Boy, you can gut them both."

Njeri managed two steps toward Yafeu before the guardsmen closed in and restrained her. "It could kill him. Especially at the hands of the inexperienced."

"You had your chance to do it, and if the boy kills him, the ghost will curse him, not me," Yafeu said. "I can't let an enemy go free."

Njeri turned to Odion. "Open me first. I can stand to lose a few drops of blood, and you will do better with the old man if your hands are practiced with the blade."

"I don't have a mindstone," he said. His whole body shook, and he reeked with the sweat of fear. "We only brought two mindstones."

The general would not be pleased. She wondered if he would order her opened without the stone. That way would surely mean death.

"Take this one." It was Kanika, her voice soft and close. In her hand was the mindstone that had held her mind, the one Njeri had given her to keep. The guardsmen moved to encircle her, but backed away at the sight of her scars. She was a ghost, a curse, a plague. Njeri couldn't believe she hadn't noticed it before, the punishment that continued after the wall.

"I will be there when you wake. We can face the world together," Kanika said. She brushed her hand against Njeri's cheek.

"Touching," General Yafeu said, "but it's time for you to go back to the hill. Unless you'd like another turn on the wall? I don't think anyone has ever faced it twice."

Kanika kissed Njeri's forehead, exactly on the spot that Odion would begin the first incision. She lingered a moment more, then walked past General Yafeu and up to the top of the hill. Odion stepped forward. It hurt the boy to see Njeri with someone else, sharing the intimacy that he himself longed for.

"You and I will share a different bond, Odion," she told him.

He nodded, and his jaw clenched as he prepared for what he must do. For a moment she feared he would refuse this duty, as she had done. It would anger Yafeu if he had to take his second prisoner to a lesser fragment of wall, and it would mean death for her and Odion—they had no claim to the citrine throne, their blood wasn't powerful enough for Yafeu to fear their ghosts. She held her mouth open and waited.

Odion pressed the mindstone between her lips, and she closed her eyes and swallowed herself.

The stone became her body. She sensed its boundaries, smooth and round. Her mind swirled restlessly inside. It felt like something was missing. She was indigo-blue. Perhaps green was missing? She searched and found flickering flecks of green, like emerald rain in her river of blue. She found red and yellow and purple. All her colors were here, but something was fundamentally wrong with this existence.

She pressed against the boundaries of her stone, and discovered thousands of tiny windows. Speckles of color were stuck to the edges of each opening. She tasted one of the windows, and the flavor of otherness repulsed her. She withdrew to the center of her stone, checking her threads of red and yellow, her flecks of green, her river of blue. She was intact.

Her churning nature sent her out to her boundaries once more, and she tasted each of the windows in turn. She began to develop favorite spots, flavors she returned to again and again. Her extremities oozed out through those windows, the ones that tasted best, and her strands of rainbow-self brought images from beyond the stone.

The first was Odion. The boy held the obsidian blade in his right hand, and a bundle of muscle tissue in his left. The tissue belonged to Njeri. The name came without the sense of self that she knew ought to accompany it. Njeri was a painting of a memory, hanging on the wall. Njeri was the body, and she was the stone, and yet they were the same.

Odion flayed Njeri open. Tiny beads of blood leaked out from misplaced seams and poorly detached muscles. The tip of the blade tore into her and isolated every thread



of her being. Odion cut Njeri's body apart, and every slice he made burned her in the space between her colors.

Odion plunged the blade into Njeri's breastbone and pried her ribcage open. She burned like a white-hot flame, a blaze too strong for her river of blue to extinguish. Ragged black canyons stretched out from Njeri's heart like festering wounds. Her colors recoiled from the darkness. Odion misted the body with water. The searing fire of pain died to glowing embers. He was finished, and he disappeared from her senses.

She stretched her colors toward the darkness. That was what was missing inside the stone. Her colors dimmed with the setting sun, but even as her red and yellow shifted into lavender and silver, there was no shadow. She reached into the dark canyons and tried to latch onto them, to pull the blackness out. Instead, the shadow pulled her inward, down through the center of Njeri's heart, and into the wall itself.

Bahtir was beside her. The cuts she had inflicted on his flesh drew her further out of herself, closer to her patient and deeper into the wall. Echoes of Bahtir's shadow-self seeped out from his body and writhed in the cracks between the giant stones of the wall. She felt his flesh, still hanging, but he stayed inside his mindstone.

Someone new appeared. She recognized the woman by her shadow. Kanika. Tendrils of red and gold and green seeped out from Kanika's mindstone, but they wandered aimlessly, without direction or purpose. Kanika had stretched out from her stone and seen visions on the wall, just as she had claimed, but the wall did not guide Kanika backward. The wall did not pull everyone as it pulled her. She wanted to stay with Kanika, but the wall carried her away.

She moved backward through time. She felt every cut of every man and every woman she'd ever flayed open, and still the torture did not end. Talib's final patients were next, the ones that she had watched to learn his trade. Then people she didn't know, stretching back before she was born, before Talib was born. The knowledge that passed from teacher to student across the generations bound them all together as surely as if they'd shared blood. She was tied to the surgeons, and that bound her to their patients.

An infant appeared on the wall. Black threads grew out from his heart like mold, and covered the insides of his ribs. His blackness barely moved, it was a constant, steady thing. She did not know if it was greed or fear or rage. Perhaps it was something she had no name for, because a shadow grew within her people before they had the words to name it. She felt the infant's agony twice over—the searing heat of the blade that cut him open, and the anguish in her heart at learning that even the innocent held shadows.

Soon after that, she came to the earliest days of her people, when watchers threw stones at those who hung helpless on the wall. Each blow crushed her colors, smashing them together into a muddy brown.

Then, nothing.

She had seen all that the wall had to show her. She waited for Odion to return, to take her down. She sensed that in her distant present, Odion was taking the men down from the wall. The men, but not Njeri. He could not bear to heal her, after having seen her darkness.

The wall rebuilt itself.

Tiny fragments merged together to form a perfect ring of glassy stone. It happened so fast that she had no way to know what had destroyed the wall. All she knew was that it was whole now. The vastness of it made her feel small, a tiny raindrop of color in an ocean of stone and light.

Two Ancients touched the wall, and she felt them as though they touched her skin. It was the end of their time, and the knowledge of that fact filled them with sadness. She waited for the surgeon, the last true surgeon, but then she realized that each of



the Ancients that touched the wall also held an obsidian blade. Moving in perfect synchrony, each Ancient sliced open the other. They controlled the blades in a way she did not understand, and even after they were opened, they continued to cut each other. The surgeon and the patient, the judger and the judged—in the time of the Ancients, both went together to the wall.

Like them, she knew both ends of the obsidian blade.

Odion appeared before her.

Not yet, she pleaded. They were almost done. She wanted to see the Ancients, to see if they had blackness. Odion began to take her down, removing the amethyst pins one by one as guardsmen held her in place. Her colors pulled back into her heart and toward her mindstone. With just one hand still pinned against the wall, she could not see the Ancients, but she could feel them, and what they did here was not punishment, it was not judgment. For them, the wall was love. The Ancients did not hide their shadows—not from each other and not from the wall. And in the moment of their union, when they lay open to each other, they drew knowledge from the wall. They absorbed the history of their people, the wisdom of countless generations.

She caught fleeting images of cities a thousand times larger than the capital, and weapons that could scar the earth itself, and ships of glassy stone that sailed not on water but in space. Her river of blue wept in undulating strands of turquoise at the beauty and the horror of their past.

Njeri's hand came free of the wall, and the connection was broken.

She watched from the mindstone as two guardsmen placed Njeri on a stretcher. They moved the body to a table, and Odion spent hours stitching it together, stopping once to sleep. The boy made two mistakes, and had to tear out the seams and start again. It didn't matter. It didn't matter how long it took, or even if he never woke Njeri at all. She had been wrong about the wall, wrong about the blackness. They had taken something beautiful, and sullied it with their imperfections.

Odion checked every seam seven times, then reached into Njeri's mouth. His touch shattered the boundaries of the stone. Her colors whirled outward, searching for structure. She dissipated into the space around her, traveling down her tendrils into Njeri's body—her body—the form she had lived in all her life. The shape of the body was wrong, like a shell that was too big.

Her eyes wouldn't open. Her body was desiccated and weak, and she couldn't stretch tendrils into the world beyond. She longed for her colors, for the fullness of history within the wall, for the knowledge of the Ancients. After such vivid truth, the drab reality of life seemed false.

Strong hands pressed against her back, and her body bent at the waist. She felt so brittle she feared the action would snap her in two. Something warm pressed against her lips. The world was out there, acting on her, shaping her body, inflicting this warmth. The heat spread down from her lips, over her skin and down her throat. It smelled of mint. Tea. Odion was giving her tea.

She wished she could open her eyes.

"The light of the wall shines upon us and reveals our shadows," Odion said. "Its light is a gift, from a race long gone from this earth. You have faced the wall and returned. Speak your name . . ."

Njeri heard the words. She heard the boy falter, and waited for the rest. *And you may go*, she thought, prompting him to finish. But she found comfort in the pause. Comfort in knowing that Odion still did not want to let her go.

"Speak your name, and you may go," Odion whispered.

Njeri opened her mouth, but no words came.

"Oh, Njeri," Odion said, breaking with tradition and speaking her name before she

had spoken it herself. "I would have sewed you sooner but the general forbade it. He insisted I start with Bahtir. But I didn't check him. Not a single seam. I was too impatient to get to you. Then, after Bahtir died, a soldier stood guard while I sewed the second man, watching work she didn't even understand to make sure I didn't unleash another vengeful ghost . . . Oh, please don't die. Please come back."

She heard the desperation in his voice, but how could she go back to the world, after what she had done? She had ruined so many lives, on a wall that wasn't meant to be used that way at all. Time passed, and more tea flowed over her. She passed through several cycles, the warmth of the tea followed each time by Odion's words. She could not speak.

Kanika's voice came from across the room. "You can't hide forever, Njeri. Speak your name and come back to us."

She was right. Njeri couldn't hide. She had seen what no one else knew, the true nature of the wall. If she did not wake, no one would know what she had discovered, and the wrong would continue. The Ancients did not hide their shadows, they learned from both their darkness and their light.

Njeri opened her eyes and spoke her name. ○

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## REINCARNATION

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In time we find a way to remember  
our past lives. Some souls stretch back  
to the invertebrates, while some  
began last century, but none, we learn, will end.

And there is no such nonsense as karma.  
The deadbeat dad can return  
as the thoroughbred horse, hourly groomed  
and fed with top-shelf oats.

All you know is that you're coming back.  
At first the suicide rate triples.  
Unhappy with your lot?  
Pitch yourself across the tracks.

Spouse shackled up with another?  
Just try again (apparently the grackle  
mates for life). Singles over thirty, all  
of middle management, entire continents



decide to do themselves. Only those  
with some responsibilities hold on,  
parents and some presidents, but soon,  
those too resolve to try again.



The Grand Canyon fills with leapers  
and razor blades bedeck the streets  
the way scratchcards once did.  
Those few that were happy with their lives



are soon helpless as children—  
no one to run the factories,  
or write pop songs, or bury the dead.  
They too take the only way out—it's a game

you're bound to win again and again.  
Eventually the few humans left on earth,  
diehards they call themselves, settle  
for death, leaving, in the end,



one child, a forgotten infant girl  
who's torn apart for a hyena's meal. Then  
it's only plants and animals, too dumb  
to know to kill themselves.

—Peter Swanson

Damien Broderick's latest critical book is *Unleashing the Strange: Twenty-First Century Science Fiction Literature*, from Borgo Press. His next one, *Chained to the Alien*, will be an anthology of essays from *Australian Science Fiction Review* (Second Series). Other recent publications include two collaborative SF novels: *The Book of Revelation*, written with Rory Barnes, and *Post Mortal Syndrome*, written with his wife Barbara Lamar. The author's recent tales for *Asimov's* have taken some inspiration from classic SF writers like A.E. van Vogt, Theodore Sturgeon, and Roger Zelazny. Damien now appears in our pages with a decidedly Dickian meditation on . . .

# DEAD AIR

Damien Broderick

Jive Bolen exited his cramped office inside the two hundred story zeugma complex in the heart of nouveau Manhattan. Summer's noon sun was a blurry disk high overhead, easily visible even through the crowding skyscrapers. The size of a ten dollar coin at arm's length. Or so he'd read in the pape during morning coffee break, hoping to ferret out some lively snippet to throw into his next abortive conversation with Jolene, the building's peripatetic Vogelsängerin, with whom he had been desperately smitten for at least the last four thwarted months. Jive fished a coin from his pouch pocket and held it up. Not quite; the frayed edges of the immense nanotech-spun soletta, stationed out at Earth-Sun L1, extended like a reddish ghost corona beyond the rim of the plastic currency unit. The literal meaning of his ghost analogy stung Jive somewhere in his cerebellum a moment too late to repress it. Shuddering, he folded the coin back into his pouch.

Something rushed directly above him. The sort of uncanny buffeting rush of air, it seemed to him in a vivid recollection from childhood, that a falling ten-ton safe creates in a toon as it tumbles from a high window to flatten a furious two-dimensional and villainous puddycat. In disbelief, Jive glanced up past the rim of his Brooks Brothers tropical pith helmet. By the living lord Harry, it *was* a safe plunging toward him, or a plausible simulation. No, light winked from the front of the thing. Leaping back, terrified, Jive tripped on the curb, fell full length. With a splintering detonation, the thing flew apart into shards of broken glass, trailing wires, microcircuitry from the previous century, plywood, and tasteless veneer. Another damned TV set, hurled from an upper window by a cit driven to despair.

Jive scrambled to his feet, retreated, lifted his eyes again. A moment later something long and large with flapping limbs flailed down to slam atop the fractured television receiver. The soggy crump of flesh striking concrete, the spatter of blood, twisted Jive Bolen's mouth in disgust. He felt a sort of remote sympathy. Another

day, another 'ratische Augen, as the Kraut socialists dubbed them. Square eyes. Mort victims of the visible dead, supposedly. Kind of ironic.

A siren was already sounding as a mortuary truckee, alerted by gossipgrll watch, raced to claim the corpse. Jive shrugged, settled his hat about his ears. Mortuarian was a job, distasteful or not. It was a living—and there was another soupçon of irony. A more socially useful job, he reproved himself, than his own dead-end post with Industrie Globalisierung, AG. Day after oppressive day, representing the shareholders on the board of management oversight, his nominal post with the Aktiengesellschaft, seemed ever more meaningless. A political contrivance. Even if it paid the bills for himself and Aunt Tilly, god bless her, and his damned wife and the kids off on the far side of the continent in Orange County. Camouflage is what it is, though, he thought, for the great owners whose blocks of stock overwhelmed the protest votes of all the small stakeholders. In effect, he was a mere stalking horse for corporate greed.

Stepping around the corner, with some difficulty putting the corpse from his mind, he bought a liverwurst brat snacker from a sidewalk multimat. Jive consoled himself with the reflection that without such immense and unthinkable concentrations of wealth and power, the sun-blocker could never have been emplaced in orbit between Earth and Sun, mitigating the greenhouse threat that would have wiped 92 percent of all surface life from the globe within a mere thousand years. According to petacomp spreadsheet calculations, at any rate. Even though they had been known, historically, to be wrong.

He hurried along Eighth Avenue, munching his sliver, and had disposed of the degradable wrapping before he recalled that he was meant to be meeting Delphine for luncheon at the Quick Brown Pig, given five full stars by Eric in the *Times Eats Guide*. These days, since the divorce, his wife worked for the Consumer Advocacy and spent a day each month at the New York offices of Rand Nader. Probably she gets to eat free at the Pig, he thought morosely, but Del will insist on my paying for us both anyway, as if I'm not already squandering danegelt on alimony and school fees. His homeowatch peeped from his wrist, reminding him belatedly and uselessly of the lunch date. Fool of a thing, its programming bollixed by the same virus that had munged all the music records in the world except for those CDs carefully wrapped and hoarded by a few thrifty collectors like himself. Could that, he thought, abruptly wildly excited, be the doorway to Jolene's singing heart? Did he dare risk humiliation, and the possible emetic degradation of his slender CD hoard?

A lovely young Chinese woman in clinging neck to heel sharkskin cheongsam bowed as he entered the dim luncheon palace. He checked his pith helmet, took a slip. With a hush of tiny slippared steps, she led him directly to an alcove where Delphine sat forward pertly, sipping an alcohol-free Manhattan and reading her own homeowatch. It projected a display directly onto her retinas, which danced like running lights in the lowered illumination of the booth. Jive slid in on the other side of the classic sparkly Formica eating bench, hearing the genuine red leather creak under his buttocks.

"Sorry I'm late."

"Oh, hi. That's all right, Jive. I had some research to catch up on before the plenary this afternoon." Del switched off her data feed and looked at him, perfectly relaxed. She wore a pillbox hat spun from Martian crabgrass, which flourished only under the light of the twin hurtling moons of the red planet. He had given her that hat as a Kwanzaa gift two years ago, as their marriage took its final dive into the dumpster. Was this her notion of conciliation, or a final turn of the knife in his spine? "And how's dear Auntie Tilly?"

"Matilda's about as well as can be expected," he said. "Morbid, actually. She's got her nose stuck in that damned old TV set my Poppa gave her for her twenty-first

birthday, the one he found on the curb and fixed up with valves he scrounged heaven knows where."

"They're the best for picking up the thays, those old ones, I hear," Delphine said absently. "I have to say, the children are still obsessed by it as well, although I notice you don't ask after them. I have to—"

"The children!" Jive said, voice roughening. "What the hell's wrong with those kids? They won't answer emails, their IM messages are totally incomprehensible, they *refuse* to pick up when I phone them."

"For heaven's sake, don't exaggerate. At their age—"

"Exaggerate! Watch and learn!" He keyed the virtual board of his homeowatch, fastclicking his children's phones. The holographic privacy display showed an instant red, with the words: NOT AVAILABLE AT THIS TIME. PLEASE LEAVE A MESSAGE, OR TRY AGAIN LATER. He turned his wrist so his former wife could witness his humiliation.

"Jevon, you're losing your bearings. It's three hours earlier on the left coast. The kids are both at morning class. You know full well they're not allowed to use the access during scholastic hours."

Deflated, Jive shook his head and reached for the menu. He wasn't hungry; the brat sat in his guts like lead. I will be conciliatory, he decided. Isn't that alleged to be one of my prime work-related skills? Isn't conciliation the doctrine of Sister Grace of Magdalene, pastor of his house of worship, the Wee Baptist Kirk i' the Glen (Scottish Rite)? To the lovely waitron, he said, "Get me a real Manhattan. And whatever my wife . . . the lady is drinking, get her another. What would you like to eat, Delphine?"

"I ordered en route. You really should eat something if you're going to drink—"

"Why do you let them watch that crap?" he asked vituperatively. "They should have their heads down to their books."

"Jive, Angelina is eight and Barack is only five, let them enjoy a bit of childhood before you start cramming—"

He slammed his fist on the table, making the cut-glass soy dispenser jump. "Watching alleged dead people is enjoying childhood? Christ, you're an intelligent, educated woman, Delphine, you must know it's just a barrage of vicious propaganda beamed down on the cit sats from those goddamned *Chinese*—"

Showing her perfect white teeth, Delphine hissed, "Lower your damned voice, you oaf. In case you hadn't noticed—"

Faces had turned their way, hiding shock behind bland contempt. The waitron stood with their drinks.

"I didn't mean . . . Oh, please, just put them down." He gestured to the great acrylic patriotic flag above them, pinned to the four corners of the room, fifty white stars on deep skyblue, three more blue stars clinging at the inner edge of the top white stripes: New Zealand, Australia, Taiwan. "I know *these* Chinese are our loyal allies, our fellow *citizens*, but it's obvious to anyone with his damned ear to the ground that these . . . these fake *dead* people are a plot to undermine the confidence of our nation. I'm *insulted*, Delphine. It's *our* people they are targeting especially, you know that, the Chinese think we're still a damned superstitious bunch of primitive jungle—"

"Shut up, you fool." His wife was on her feet, seething yet containing her fury. Holding her handbag against her breast, she said, "You can get the check. I should have known better. And give the kids a call at a time when it suits them, not you."

His head had started throbbing. He threw back the Manhattan, coughed. To the impassive waitron, he said, "Get me another. And a soluble ginseng anticid."

His head echoed like a jug kicked by a steel-tipped boot. Ensconced again in the refitted storage room that was his office, Jive Bolen groaned. He was drinking too much.

Two Manhattans on a stomach with nothing in it but a brat sliver, it was self-destructive. His tongue rolled again and again against his lips, trying to dispel the over-sweet taste of cherry and burned orange peel. He noticed what he was doing, and recoiled in disgust. This was the tic that had disfigured poor Gran Bolen as she subsided inch by inch toward the grave. Tardive dyskinesia, the medically induced disorder of the nervous system inflicted by early-generation antipsychotic drugs, those barbarously crude neuroleptics such as metoclopramide. Induced supersensitivity to dopamine in the nigrostriatal pathway, damaging the D2 dopamine receptor. Or so he'd been told by the apologetic physician who finally had changed the old lady's regimen, but too late, far too late. She had thought to see the dead, Jive recalled, with a shudder. Her erratic thought disorders, that late turn to Buddhism, to the belief in the Bardo Thodol and afterlife demons. As if the word of the Lord Savior were not enough.

He fumbled off a cap of cuffee, heard the hiss as it self-heated, drank it down with a trembling hand. What's wrong with me? he wondered. It's this damned cramped work space, he thought, staring peevishly at the wall to his right, the racks of classic Barbie dolls still in their virginal packaging.

Without knocking, his Uzbek secretary, Hammerlock Ganji, poked his head around the door jamb. "Christ, you look terrible, Chief. You're drinking too much."

"Shut up," Jive said. He took another swig, but the cap was empty. The foul taste of the synthetic lingered on his lips, and he felt his tongue once again begin its bovine rotation. "It's these quarters, Ganj. Undignified for a man of my station."

Neither said anything further; it was simply a fact of life that in these straitened times the great multinational corps had to impose the most severe restrictions on their senior factors, and to be seen to do so. Ganji entered the office, squeezed past Jive's desk, stood examining, as he often did, with a perfervid fascination, the fantastically expensive collectible Barbara Millicent Roberts manikins in their plastic and cardboard cages. There was not a single Ken mounted on the wall.

"You need cheering up," Hammerlock said at length. His eyes traveling back again to the dolls in their pristine boxes. If one of them ever went missing, which was unlikely given the covert security features in situ, Jive would know where to turn.

"I hear Jolene is in the building. I'll have her drop by. A professional call," he said hastily. "It's part of the building code, as you know, Chief."

"If you wish," Jive said, foraging ostentatiously in a pile of hard-copy documents. "Go away now, I'm busy."

It could only have been ten minutes later when he heard her cheerful birdsong soprano carol his name at the open door.

"I told my secretary I'm too busy for therapeutic melody today," he said gruffly.

"Never too hectic for a heart-filling tune, I hope," she said, and perched herself on the edge of his desk. "What's it to be? Cole Porter? Wit and a jaunty air. Something from the Beatles collection? I love 'Here Comes the Sun,' although people have gone off it, and I suppose we mustn't blame them."

"Come again," said Jive, decisively. Jolene had the power and sweetness of a young Linda Ronstadt—it was possible that she could meet the demands of Dowland. If she knew his work.

"Come again?" she said, grinning.

"It needs a lutenist to accompany the lyrics," Jive told her. "John Dowland? Turn of the seventeenth century?"

"Sorry."

"It's the most perfect music I've ever heard." He cleared his throat and sang, well enough to convey the tune, if not much more, reverberant in the small office, "Thy graces that refrain, To do me due delight." He took a deeper breath, knowing how it should be done, even if it was beyond his capacity to build the energy across the oc-



tave, note by note, phrase by phrase, to a gently controlled climax and release conveying the doomed sense of one long, last breath, one sigh: "To see, to hear, To touch, to kiss, To die . . ." His baritone broke, and shamefacedly he finished, in a growl, "With thee again, In sweetest sympathy."

The young woman was thunderstruck.

"Oh, Mr. Bolen, that's just . . . that's—beautiful. Is there a recording. . . ?"

Jive gazed at her, refreshed, his headache eased. "As a matter of fact, I have probably the last uncorrupted CD pressing of Sarah Brightman and Andrea Bocelli singing the duet. One of the last Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft releases before the emetic plague erased— Do you think you'd care to visit my apt and hear it on my classic eMachines CD player?"

Instead of answering, she sang the fragment back to him, with luscious honeyed fragrance, effortlessly soaring. He felt his eyes dampen.

"It's about the thays, that song," she told him guilelessly. "To die again. I wonder how that composer knew, so long ago? In sweetest sympathy. Although they don't look terribly happy."

Jive frowned.

"You're not, I hope, speaking of—"

"Did you see Leno & Letterman last night? It was hilarious. They had the top ten thays, you know, live feeds from viewers' homes."

"Don't call them that. It's all a vicious—"

"Oh, but they *are* disconnected thetans, it's been scientifically proved." Sweet Jesus, Jive realized, she's a 'tologist. Probably second or third generation. But no more eccentric, he decided, than a Mormon or a Moonie. She leaned forward, and light gleamed below her throat, at the open neck of her bright daffodil-yellow blouse. In that moment, he felt entirely prepared to overlook her 'tology belief structure, even forgive the golden—or gold-plated—icon nestled in Jolene's small ripe cleavage. The icon, he noticed suddenly, hung from a fine gold chain linked to a pair of bolts in the saint's neck. Like those terrible old Frankenstein movies. Out burst a guffaw. After a moment of uncertainty, the friendly smile was gone from her face.

"What."

Oh Christ. Risk everything on one wild throw of the die? What the heck. The thick Germanic neck of the iconic Church bust (speaking of busts) was turned outward, its coarse features nuzzling at her. "I couldn't help notice where your Divine Founder has his face buried," he said jovially. "If a man was ambitious, he might hope . . ." He trailed off.

The sängerin stared at him, speechless. Then a hesitant smile. A shudder of relief jolted through him. Where innocent ribaldry entered freely, soon more joyful bawdry might follow.

"Hey!" she said, then, suddenly frowning. "Are you mocking my faith?"

Jive shook his head piously. "I wouldn't dream of it, darling."

Inside the cozy plastic-shelled condo apartment high above what had once been the Hudson River and was now a stack of mighty water-pumping carbonoid pipes buried below the condo struts, he found Aunt Tilly eating a boiled Raptosaurus egg from both ends. The edible DNA-recovered commercial product rolled unsteadily on her blue-etched dining plate, spilling white albumen and deep orange yolk on the tablecloth. The dignified old lady, dressed formally for dinner in mothball-reeking black and white, kept her eyes fixed on his near-wall-sized HDTV display. At her hand, the remote shined its merry red activation light. On the screen, a morose peasant face of Asian mien gazed out hopelessly at them both. Others wandered in the ill-defined monotone background, as if peering in at the living-dining quadrant,

shaking their heads, moving on. Damn it, he thought, my half-senile charge has changed the channel again in my absence. He had warned her repeatedly. Maybe he needed to invoke a Parental Warning lock-down code. But, to his chagrin, he realized that he did not know how to do that.

He picked up the remote, fiddled with it impotently. He changed the channel to a repeat of *Baywatch*, but, to his fury, the fully electronic selector switched it back. The Chinese civ-sat radiations, he thought indignantly; they've hijacked my HDTV digital set. Swearing under his breath, he switched it off. Tilly moaned, looked reproachfully at him. She had yolk smeared over the bright red clown's mouth of her lip gloss. In his hand, without his intervention, the red pilot light flashed on again. The screen filled with its voiceless parade of woe.

He threw the useless piece of junk down on the table, and went to the small kitchen sink to find a washcloth. The newscasts were correct, then. Not just the old pre-digital sets were vulnerable, though they provided the best registration of the images, apparently. Any set with a remote control was now susceptible to manipulation by these spurious dead, or more properly their Potemkin-style manipulators, who channeljacked it instantly to their interface feed.

Creating the impression, at least in the gullible, of departed souls searching endlessly for the living they had left behind.

It was more than he could take. Jive threw the dampened cloth down into the sink, left Tilly dully viewing the propaganda, and went into his bedroom. Behind a matched, leather-bound set of the *Left Behind* novels Tilly had given him four or five birthdays ago, before her deterioration had proceeded to its current sorry state, he found a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniel's. He uncapped it, entered the half bath alcove, poured a healthy slug into his tooth glass.

I have to stop drinking, he told himself, feeling the burn. After a time, though, his depression faded away. An image of that lovely little birdsongstress filled his heart with growing elation. He'd have to dispose of Tilly for the evening. Maybe the two middle-aged ladies on the floor above, a long-term lesbian couple if he recognized the signs, would look after the senile old thing for the night. He couldn't imagine that they'd take any liberties. Not, at any rate, the kind he planned for Jolene. He wondered idly if the girl had a surname. Must have, stood to reason. Social Security stamp, the whole ID apparatus. Christ, really it didn't matter. He poured another shot.

"Sweet love doth now invite,

"Thy graces that refrain

"To do me due delight," sang Ms. Brightman's simulated voice, admittedly not representative of her peak but glorious still. Jolene sat decorously on the edge of his large formerly marital bed—he'd cunningly moved the CD apparatus out of the living room and into more congenial surrounds—and listened intently. Her eyes, he was happy to see, shone. As the next verse began, she read ahead from the printout he'd prepared, and sang in perfect counterpoint to Bocelli: "Come again,

"That I may cease to mourn

"Through thy unkind disdain

"For now left and forlorn."

He might as well have not been in the room. Song was her passion, that and her oddball faith. But now, after that heartbreaking pause, she turned her eyes on him and sang with the two reconstructed voices, male and female:

"I sit, I sigh,

"I weep, I faint,

"I die, in deadly pain

"And endless misery . . ."

Her eyes were bright with pain.

Perhaps, Jive thought, too late, this was not the best choice of song for a seduction. But the ravishing beauty of her voice, so much richer in this room, singing these old words, was so much more enthralling than in the light ditties she cast upon the conditioned air of the zeugma structure where they worked. He waited, spellbound but sorrowing, as she sang the rest of the verses.

"Deadly pain and endless misery," she said, finally. "That's what the thays are showing us." She clutched hopelessly at her pendant icon, and burst into tears.

He packed away his precious, irreplaceable recording while she visited the bathroom, and then, trying to hide his irritation and painful sexual arousal, escorted her home.

Jive was half in the bag as he slipped a farecard across the turnstile and joined what seemed a substantial proportion of steaming, sweating New York on the 50th Street subway platform. Why didn't I get a cab? he asked himself. Is this my pathetic way of punishing myself? Is my thalamic function overriding my essentially sane frontal brain, driving me into some sort of deliberate confrontation with the world of the Arbeitnehmer, the common workers I'm meant to be representing? He squeezed his eyes shut against the buffeting of the train as it pulled in to the station, grit and oil-scented air flying up like some Biblical plague of insects. He was jostled getting aboard, and held his tropical helmet with one hand as his homey popped on and reminded him in its high-pitched child's voice that he had an appointment at two, with the engineers at the new Thane of Cawdor thanatorium labs. He snapped the home-watch off with a grunt. Fool thing, where the heck did it think he was headed on this damned crowded train? And what did the idiots at Industrie Globalisierung, AG, think they were doing, sending him to oversee the so-called findings of this bunch of palpable crackpots?

They sped under old Manhattan. The air-conditioning was on the fritz, hardly unusual. Imagine how life would be without the soletta, he thought. If this was actually the true greenhouse effect everyone was suffering, rather than an attenuated, sunlight-blocked ghost of—he caught his own thought again, snarled at himself. Those things, those mechanical interruptions on the screen, they were not ghosts, not the dead. It was a filthy political stunt, a sort of techno-brainwashing. No matter what foolish Tilly maintained, glued hour after hour in her darkened room, anxiously watching the dead, as she supposed them to be, marching behind her cathode ray tube, peering out, gesturing, their mouths moving silently.

Jesus, wasn't it obvious? Whatever that dear little professional virgin Vogelsängerin believed. Most of them must be Chinese actors, you could tell at a glance. In those tasteless Mao suits, or old fashioned wrapping of one kind or another. Or Indians, not Native American, dark featured and gaunt from the Indian subcontinent, or Pakistan, or Bali, or whatever. A fashion show of faux-starved mummies from hell. He shuddered, rocking as the train thudded over tracks loosely fixed to sleepers unrepaired for years. Every spare cent was required for the big boosters shoving up the materiel to spin the soletta into being, there at the Lagrange libration point nine hundred thousand miles from Earth. That, or the planet would be roasted. Not immediately, true—but in another millennium. Was that why the dead were suddenly hanging about, shoving their damned stupid faces into people's primetime viewing—

Jive caught himself with an audible obscenity.

"No call for that language, sir," a young blonde mother said, rebuking him with a scowl as she turned her child away.

Apologize? Damn it, no. He was furious with himself, with the way he'd allowed the absurd obsessions of gullible people to draw his unconscious into betraying what

he knew for a fact. The train was pulling into Brooklyn; he pushed his way to the door. One consolation: if he'd taken a cab he'd have been cooler, yes, and the ride smoother, but he'd still be trapped somewhere in traffic-lock, probably. With the meter ticking.

The so-called thanatorium was within walking distance of High Street station. His headache was easing, and his dyspepsia.

A long-jawed, raw-boned specimen in a stained lab coat introduced him, the head of engineering, Dr. Samuels. Bart Samuels asked him to say a few preparatory words on behalf of the oversight entity of their funding body.

"Very well, gentlemen. And lady," Jive told the assembled nerds and geeks in the traditional garb of their professions or trades. "Let me make one thing clear. I don't want to hear any claptrap—and I believe I speak for the Aktiengesellschaft in saying this—about discarnate souls, or cross-overs, or unnucleated thetans." The nerds lounged as if they were taking an authorized anti-stress break, sucking their Prozac spansules, and stared at him without interest, dully. The one woman scientist or engineer actually rolled her eyes. Then, to his disbelief, she poked out her tongue, not at him but for her own entertainment, rolled it as well, and stared cross-eyed at its purplish tip. This was impudence beyond his capacity to cope. He took his seat abruptly, turning his back on most of them. Samuels signalled a bored audiovisual geek to activate the bank of some twenty antique television receivers arrayed like something out of the Apollo project command room three-quarters of a century earlier.

The screens took an agonizingly long moment to come alive, as tubes warmed and electrons skittered about inside magnetic fields. One by one, then, the grey screens lit up with images: two repeats of *I Love Lucy* and one of *Gunsmoke*, broadcast on the free-to-view channels, and a maddening diorama of meaningless, unscripted, silently parading men, women, and children. *The Family of Man*, Jive told himself, half-hysterically, recalling a book his grandma had loved and made him leaf through every time he and his sisters visited her in the nursing home. Gone these two score years, God bless her. And here were the same faces of every nation, peering out into the drab humming, shuffling, and rustling of the ad hoc, modified media lab.

One of the nerds came forward to a podium. "We've had trained law enforcement lip readers examine the images, Mr. Bolen," he said in a bored, impudent tone. "Most of them are speaking Mandarin, Cantonese, and dialectal variants. There's an admixture of other major languages, of course, including German, Arabic, English, French, Spanish—"

"Chinese, you say!" Jive cried.

"They seem to be lost and looking for their families. The popular rumor that they are so-called 'thays' or thetans is not borne out by synoptic analysis of the recorded utterances to date. The more articulate among their number are asking for our aid, the assistance of living scientists. Hence this briefing. We are not authorized to—"

"Aid? Aid? Crap! A scheme to divert our remaining resources to ideological lunatics who wish to see the planet's climate disrupted, to their own sectional advantage." Although what benefit could accrue to anyone other than the Inuits he couldn't imagine. Least of all those closer to the tropics.

"Sir, we do have a few ideas about what's causing this manifestation," said Bart Samuels. "It seems likely that the soletta structure is intercepting or even enhancing insolation in the cerebral theta range. Despite racist rumors of a geopolitical flavor—"

Jive cut him off. "Listen, don't give me any moralizing hocus-pocus and run-around," he said angrily, remaining seated but raising his voice so nobody in the room would miss his import. "Three weeks ago, I saw a man throw himself from a tenth story window, driven to desperation by these preposterous . . . things." He flung one hand at the screens. "First he'd torn his TV set off the wall, and thrown it into the street,

where the goddamned thing nearly killed me. Then he jumped after it, and did kill himself. This is not a new furtive viral advertising campaign. It is not a political ploy by some misguided faction of the American *Unterschicht* or *sotto classe*."

He rose, faced the useless pointy-headed drones, then looked back up in rage at the drifting images of despair. If what the screen displayed was truly hell, or some other version of the afterlife, as Tilly and Jolene claimed, it undercut everything a man could believe, could work toward in his career. How could you bring children into a world if this abomination was their destiny? "No," he roared, with the deep-throated power of a Baptist choir baritone. "A fraud! These are computer-generated engrams projected into our living rooms on stolen citizen satellite channels by the Chinese national zaibatsus. Or, if not them, revanchists in the Saudi peninsula. They can't be..." His voice drained away, suddenly, as an image caught his eye. Bile rose in his throat. "Oh my dear god. Granny Bolen? Can that be you?"

An old woman's face peered down at him from the closest orthicon tube display, and in a series of snapping jumps copied itself across all of the banked monitors. The muted mutter of Desi Arnaz and James Arness was wiped away. Jive Bolen stared up at his dead grandmother, who looked back in terror at him from twenty grey windows. Her wrinkled hands pressed the inner edges of the screens, and her mouth moved, again and again, in a sort of voiceless screaming supplication. Jive felt his own lips mimic the movements of her mute mouth. *Help me*, he mouthed back, mirroring her cry. *Get me out of here, little Jevon*. Aloud, Jive said, softly, "Help me." Tears ran down his cheeks.

Hammerlock Ganji reached Jive on his phone as he waited impatiently in the research thanatorium lobby for his cab back to the city.

"You're better off waiting there until things calm down, chief," the secretary told him, licking lips nervously.

"Tarry in Brooklyn? Don't be absurd, Ganji." A small red gypsy cab pulled up outside the plate glass lobby. God, is that what we've sunk to now, in our effort to attain a low fiscal profile? Through the dirty vehicle window he saw a villainous wild-haired import from Turkestan or points farther east apparently shouting into an old-fashioned mic with a helical cable. A moment later the cool receptionist crossed the carpet and murmured that his ride awaited. Jive gave her a reflex smile and nod, and went out into the soletta-muted sunlight. A disturbing tang hung in the air. Wood smoke? He coughed, suddenly. Something more toxic than that.

"Get in, mister, you want a ride," the driver told him, pushing the passenger door open from the inside. "We gotta move fast, before anyone catches on we're coming from this science place."

"What?" Jive had no chance to buckle up before the cabbie took off with a screech. They tore through a small crowd of scowling citizens who loitered at the gates of the lab. What the hell? There was a thud, and another. "For the love of sweet Harry," he cried, "those fools are throwing *rocks* at you."

"Not me, professor—you." He gunned the little car's electric hybrid engine, flung it onto the feeder to the bridge. Jive ducked his tall head, wound down the filthy window. Streamers and pillars of smoke were slowly drifting upward from the Manhattan skyline, billowing into the damaged sunlight. "Blogs are saying kill all scientists."

"I'm not a scientist, I'm a... a high-status administrator." For some reason, saying so made Jive Bolen feel profoundly ashamed. "It's part of my duties to oversee the efforts of bona-fide researchers in the domain of—" He broke off. "Christ, why am I explaining myself to a gypsy hack? Just get me to the zeugma, and step on it."

His homeowatch and phone were both peeping; he shifted his mind into high, concentrated gear. A thudding racket ahead pulled up his head. A laden moving van had

ploughed into two or three cars illegally stopped at the edge of the feeder. The 'staner cursed or prayed vehemently, perhaps in the name of Allah, and jerked them to one side, skidding past the pile-up. God almighty, men stood by the side of the road with rifles and shotguns. The windshield starred, shattered, fell into fragments of safety glass. Ganji said, faintly, like a voice of conscience, "Bolen, the thays want all the scientists dead. The streets are clogged with crazies who agree with them. Just get the hell off the road and lay low for a—"

Impact jarred his teeth. The door beside him sprang open, and Jive tumbled bruisingly to the road surface. Pain tore up his right arm as his hand broke at the wrist. He lost consciousness. The pain was gone. He lay in the silent, empty street for minutes or hours, passing in and out of clarity. People were moving past him. Nobody stopped to help. The damn world's gone mad, he told himself. It's been a powder keg ready to go bang ever since the hothouse shock really struck home, when we realized we needed to spend every penny the world makes putting up that shield in space. And Christ knows what that's done, in addition. He seemed for a moment to be back in the Wee Kirk i' the Glen, hearing obese, powerful Sister Mary Magdalene belt out the verses of "God of Earth and Outer Space," that sprightly Baptist hymnal entry by the Welshman Joseph Parry. He smiled in the grey twilight. A lot they knew about outer space back then, in the nineteenth century. Sister Mary powered away as he piped along in the choir, with his sisters singing lustily. Where are they, he asked himself. Where are my sisters? At length Jive stumbled to his feet, holding his brutalized right arm tenderly with his left hand against his breast. Now that he was home again, he could get it looked at by competent medical practitioners. After that terrible near-accident, escaping from it shakily, stumbling inside his apt, he found Aunt Tilly absent. Of course, she was staying for several days upstairs with those pleasant dykes. A nice couple, for all their gene-reproductive dysfunction. He walked through the house, and with increasing alarm found that his wife and children were also gone. Plaintively, he called their names. "Angelina, where are you, honeypie? Barack, you scamp? Come out, come out." Silence, and the rustle of strangers inside his home. "Delphine, you bitch!" He found himself on the ground floor and wandered in the smoke-filled streets. Others were drifting along as if dazed, staring into windows, some in the middle of the streets. Why was the traffic stalled? Someone caught his sleeve, spoke urgently, but he couldn't seem to hear the man's voice. The man raised a crudely wrought sign, rendered in thick black marker pen ink on the back, evidently, of an advertising poster: SEND THE SEINTISTS OVER, THEY HAV 2 HELP US. A flicker of motion caught his eye, reflected in the side window of a motionless Hyundai sedan. Behind the curved window, half-seen, the driver sat, listening to his phone. Reflected in the glass, faces passed, jumbled and unfamiliar. Terrified, Jive shook his head in denial. He sat edgily in his favorite armchair, activated the HDTV to distract himself and settle his nerves. The machine wasn't working right. A new emetic virus attack? His daughter's monochrome face contorted in the wide frame of the image. He lumbered to his feet, went to the out-of-order plasma image. The child rushed away behind the screen and returned with his wife and son, who peered in apparent horror at the camera. When was this home movie shot? He couldn't recall. Where is Tilly? In the monochrome, silent background, he watched Delphine turn her head, walk with her head clasped in her hands like a mime doing an impression of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. Gentle love, he thought absurdly, recalling Dowland, Draw forth thy wounding dart. She opened the front door. Upheaval in the background, black and white gouts of flame and smoke. People were running, striking each other. Two cops stood, hats in hand, unhappy, bearing bad news Jive Bolen could not bear to hear. ○

—to Phil's memory, of course



# THE WOMAN WHO WAITED FOREVER

Bruce McAllister

Bruce McAllister has just finished his first novel in twenty years. The book is tentatively titled *The Village That Sang to the Sea: A Memoir of Magic* and includes the haunting tale of "The Woman Who Waited Forever" as one of its episodes. The author gleefully tells us that he is almost done with a second novel as well, and that he has stories forthcoming in *F&SF*, *Cemetery Dance*, and *Albedo One*.

*Love is never finished.*

—Thomas Mann

**T**he military, like every other world, has its social classes, with an impossible chasm between officer and enlisted—something that even a foxhole or military hospital has a hard time breaking down, and something that will always be haunted by the dead whispering of injustice. When you're the son of a Naval Academy graduate, you know that those crewcut, knockdown, book-avoiding kids on the school bus with you in the sunny port of San Diego are going to play rough touch football with their dads while you play a dignified game of tennis with yours, that their families will ride loud power boats on the bay while yours prefers the grace of sailboats, and that yours will belong to a sedate yacht club while theirs will throw rowdy barbecues on public beaches. Those kids wouldn't be caught dead doing what you're asked to do at the parties your father and mother have for the other officer families, namely, helping serve hors d'oeuvres in little mahogany bowls. In fact, they'd probably pants you if they caught you doing it. All because they're the sons of the enlisted, while you're the son of a three-striper.

You may envy them their confidence and scars, but even at your age you know that family is destiny. The privileged, though cursed by their own ghosts, are still privileged, wouldn't have it any other way, and haven't since the beginning of time, whether in war or peace.

So it was a shock, especially to the adults, to encounter—when my father was stationed with NATO in Europe during the Cold War—an officer's family that didn't behave like one at all, that acted "enlisted," and that, because it did, threatened the cosmological order of things in the tiny community of officer families at that NATO center in northern Italy. The two sons, Keith and Bobby, could certainly have held



their own with those enlisted Army, Navy, and Marine kids on that school bus in San Diego. And the daughter—well, the daughter could have held her own, too, but in other ways.

Their father was a commander, too, like mine—Commander John Speer—and there were strange things about the family beyond the fact that his two sons, Keith, at fifteen, and Bobby, at eighteen, were tough as nails, boasting, in fact, as one of their favorite pastimes, shooting lit cigarettes out of each other's mouths with a .22. Their sister—whose name, Chastity, said it all—was a model United Nations, that is, she had the hots for any boy of any nationality she could find; and find them she did at Lungamara, the swimming cove where the families of officers from Italy, America, Germany, and France—those who worked at the NATO Center thirty minutes north in the industrial port of La Creccia—could sun themselves on the weekends and swim in the crystal-clear waters of the Ligurian Sea. Chastity was, we all knew, "sexually active," though the term we all used was the much less clinical "slut." To the adults, Chastity's mother was one too, but for the strangest reason: She was pregnant at forty-five. Her husband was the father of the baby, of course; but in those days, you just didn't have a kid at forty-five with a fifteen-year difference between your youngest kids. It was a scandal, and the part that family would play in a story of love's denial of death couldn't change that.

I'd learned enough Italian with a tutor our first summer there that I was attending middle school in the little fishing village where we lived. The Speer boys, however, were being educated at a monastery near Rome, so they weren't around much; and when they were, I was supposed to play with them because they were officer's kids, too, but also because my parents didn't know what troublemakers they were. I wondered if the monks beat them. I couldn't imagine them obeying fat little men in brown robes. I couldn't imagine them obeying their father either, but for all I knew he was, behind closed doors, even tougher than the monks were.

Why I played with them, scary as they were, I don't know; but they had that weird charisma all bad boys have for boys who are a little too "good." They're the stuff of our secret fantasies: "If I had the courage—and wouldn't get in trouble—that's what I'd do too—shoot cigarettes out of someone's mouth with a gun!"

"Speer? What nationality is that?" I asked Keith one day as we headed down from my family's *villetta*, our little house, to the next cove, his brother somewhere else for a change.

"What do you mean—nationality? We're Americans, asshole."

He'd call you every name in the book, but he'd still hang out with you. Whether he really liked you, you never knew; but he'd appear and want to hang out because you were the only thing available.

"I know that, Keith. I mean, your people—your ancestors—what country did they come from?"

He was staring at me as if I was accusing him of something.

"My people are from Scotland," I said stupidly, trying to make the sparks leave the air. "But that was a couple hundred years ago."

"Well, la-di-da, Brad."

We walked on for a while. Why was he so upset?

"It's a German name," he said at last, "but that doesn't mean we're Nazis."

"I wasn't saying you were a Nazi." I wanted to laugh, but this was a serious matter for him. I wanted to say, "Nobody's a Nazi now, Keith—World War II was a long time ago," but didn't.

"Gee, thanks."

"Why . . . why would anyone think you're a Nazi?"

"Because of the name."

"I didn't even know it was German."

We kept walking and, just as I'd given up on an answer, Keith said:

"If you know history, my dad says, you know the name Speer."

"He was a Nazi?"

"Of course."

"Why does that make *you* a Nazi?"

"Jesus, Brad," he said. "You're dense."

I was silent.

"Because you're related?" I said at last. "You're the same Speer he was?"

"Shit, yes. Distant cousins. . . ."

I didn't say anything after that. It had been fifteen years since the war had ended, and here was a kid my own age who was still living it. The Speer kids were as American as you could get—nothing German about them, let alone Nazi—and here was Keith afraid of what someone would think.

The Speer boys left on Sunday to return to their monastery, and I went back to playing with my friends from school—Carlo, Maurizio, and Gianluca—boys I felt I understood better than I understood Keith. Fantasies aside, Keith made no sense to me—shooting a .22 at his brother's face, ringing doorbells and running, stealing things for no reason, talking about girls in the grossest ways, being the worst possible ambassador from America, and feeling much more uneasy about an old war than my village friends did, though they had relatives who'd lost arms and legs and eyes in that war and many of their aunts wore black—because they'd lost their husbands in the war.

Later, the next year, I'd be playing in the olive groves below our house with those friends and a fourth, Armando Muraro, whose mother was German, and two other boys we didn't really know. One of those boys, frustrated at losing a game, would get mad at Muraro and call him a "Nazi." Muraro would cry. He would cry hard. But that day hadn't happened yet. The events at the long-abandoned German hospital in the next cove hadn't happened either, so I hadn't yet learned that an old war could reach beyond death to children born after its official end.

The next time I saw Keith, Bobby was with him. Their dad had bought them bows and arrows, and they wanted to go shoot them somewhere. Since my parents didn't know about the .22 and cigarettes—or the doorbell ringing—my dad, who was a good guy, said, "Sure, Brad, you can have a bow and arrows, too. Where are you going to shoot?"

"Keith wants to go to the cove between here and San Terenzo."

Had I known what was going to happen, I'd have said instead, "The cove with the old German hospital." But had I known, I also wouldn't have gone.

"Okay. But I want you and Keith—and anyone else who's going—to check in beforehand."

When we were ready, there were four of us. Keith, me, a friend of Keith's from the monastery school, and an Italian kid I'd just gotten to know. His name was Marco, and he was from Vecchia Eri, the old part of the fishing village, the alleys of fishermen and seamstresses—in other words, the working class. How I knew him when I was in the *scuola media*—with the sons of "professionals," the middle and upper classes—and not the *scuola tecnica*, where he was, where the blue-collar kids went after they graduated from elementary school, was a simple story. I'd always liked fishing—you sometimes do when you're a Navy brat—so I often fished on the wharf or on the rocks by the *passaggiata*, that waterfront walkway where young couples appeared at sunset and strolled peacefully while old people sat on the benches and enjoyed watching them. Sometimes our teacher, *Professore* Brigola, who taught us most of our subjects, was a hunchback and had a lisp—and was so kind we thought

he was a saint reincarnated—would fish there too, and so we'd fish together. Even at my age I knew—we all did—that he did this so that his students could talk to him if they wanted to. He didn't do it for himself, in other words; he didn't do it because he was lonely. Rumor was that he loved a woman in San Terenzo, one he had met during the war, and that she had either died in that war or would not marry him because he was a hunchback; and that, either way, he could not have her. So he must have longed for love, but that didn't mean he was lonely. He'd been born a hunchback and it had only gotten worse. The villagers liked him, admired him, and felt from him the same soul we all felt; and, though he had to return each night to his apartment, where he did live alone, he didn't feel sorry for himself. He wasn't like that. He loved his students, and he wanted to be there for them whether in school or out; and I sometimes think that he sat there fishing, waiting for them, because he heard a ticking clock—one that told him he wouldn't live as long as most people, so he should be down there talking to his boys whenever he could, before the ticking stopped. Hunchbacks don't live long in any country, and this was a long time ago. Twenty years later, when I was married and had kids of my own, I would go back to that village to find him, to give him a gift—a book of stories I'd written about that village—and thank him for his kindness; but he had died years before, as we'd all known he would.

One day after school I was sitting with him, and we were fishing, but not really. We weren't even talking. We were just sitting there, and a boy—rather small and darker than my friends from the *scuola media*—walked over to us and sat down too with his pole. He nodded, but said nothing, and our teacher said, "*Buon giorno, ragazzo,*" and the boy nodded again. "*Buon giorno, signore,*" he answered. There was only one hunchback in the village, our teacher, so the boy certainly knew who he was.

He wasn't a shy boy. He was simply quiet, in the same way that the fishermen of the village were quiet. In Naples and elsewhere to the south, I'm sure fishermen sang. Maybe on Sardinia they sang, too, but in this village the fishermen, whether on the wharf dumping their catch onto the tables where the fisherwomen could sell them, or on their boats getting things ready for their next trip, or putting the nets away for the day, they were silent. There was a rhythm to what they did—I could feel it—anyone could—and perhaps, I often told myself, this was their singing.

"What fish are you angling for?" our teacher asked the boy. I'm not sure the boy even had bait, but our teacher was not going to embarrass him.

"Anything."

"For 'anything,'" our teacher said, with that lisp that softened everything, "you should try as many kinds of bait as possible. Would you like to try what I have?"

The boy nodded, and our teacher handed him a little bucket of bait—cheese, tiny bread balls, and earthworms—reaching behind me to give it to him since I was between them.

"Thank you," the boy said.

We caught nothing, but were happy enough. The afternoon sun—it was after school—caught the waves by the little jetty, but did not blind us when we looked. The brightly colored fishing boats—the ones that had left before dawn and come back in at noon—bobbed in the cove; and the castle, the one that Pisa and Genoa had fought over for centuries, looked down at us. I wondered if the unhappy witch who lived there, spitting at the tourists, could see us and was giving us the evil eye, *mal'occhio*; but in the late afternoon sun, sitting with two people who seemed to enjoy sitting with me, I didn't really care, and the question wriggled away like a minnow in the waters below us.

"This time of day," our teacher said, "isn't the best time to catch fish, of course."

The boy said nothing.

"But it is nice to sit here."

The boy gave a little grunt.

It felt as if our teacher were waiting for something, though I had no idea what. It wasn't fish. He never caught any, and when he did, he seemed shocked that there should be something on his line. "What in God's name is *that*?" he would say.

He was waiting for something, but what? For the boy to talk? That wasn't like him either, to care whether a boy spoke or not during fishing. Silence didn't bother our teacher. Little did. Even when boys were bad in class—using the sign-language that everyone somehow knew to help each other answer oral-exam questions—he usually laughed and simply wagged his finger and went on to the next question.

"May we know your name?" our teacher asked.

The boy looked at me, then at him, then at me again, and said, "Marco."

"Well, Marco, it has been pleasant sitting with you and Brad this afternoon, but I must now go home to grade dictation papers. I hope you and Brad will use the bait bucket. You may keep it, in fact, if you would like. I have many others."

What he'd been waiting for, I knew then, was the right moment to leave—the right moment to ask Marco's name, and then to leave us, but in a way that would make us stay and fish together and perhaps talk—an American boy from an officer's family and a Ligurian boy from the dark, old part of town, the kind of kid I didn't know, but should, just as he should know someone like me, but would not if our teacher did not handle his departure perfectly and leave us to become friends for at least an afternoon.

I also knew that our teacher did not have other buckets, that this bucket, old and battered as it was, was his favorite; but that if he left it with us, we would have to stay.

Marco and I used up the bait. He caught two *bocca d'oro*'s, and I caught a *sparo*—all three of them little fish, but pretty enough, shining in the late afternoon light. At least we'd caught something—which does matter to boys even if doesn't matter to their teacher.

When the bait was gone—our fish dangling from strings in our hands—Marco tried to give me the bucket.

"No, you should keep it," I started to add, "I already have one," but I knew how that might, if he were sensitive, sound: *I, the middle school kid, have more than you*. Instead I said: "You heard him say it. He wants you to have it."

Marco nodded, and that was that. We were friends, just as our teacher had planned.

The day Keith and his friend from the monastery school—another American, but a civilian—appeared at our house with their bows and arrows—and I had mine, bought the day before at our monthly trip to the PX in Livorno—Marco appeared suddenly at our *villetta*'s door, too, fishing pole in hand.

"Will you be fishing today?" he asked me in Italian.

"No," I answered. "I'm going with an American friend to shoot bows and arrows."

Keith and his friend had walked over and were standing beside me. Keith didn't like it when I spoke Italian, and he was staring at Marco. We were about to go in to see my father—to hear his "rules" before we headed to the cove—and Keith, annoyed that we might get a long lecture, wanted to get going.

"Marco," I said in Italian, "this is my American friend, Keith." Keith's Italian was terrible, and so was Bobby's. For some reason the monks weren't making them learn it—or maybe they were trying and the Speer boys were refusing.

Keith scowled and said, "His name's Marco?"

"Yes."

"So, Marco . . ." Keith said to him in English, not at all friendly, and for a moment Keith and Marco stared at each other. Keith obviously didn't want Marco around. We

were getting ready for an adventure, Keith was in charge, and he didn't want someone who could speak only Italian tagging along.

But when I looked at Marco's face, I saw no hostility—the kind Keith's eyes had. I saw simply a look that said Marco recognized the kind of boy Keith was; that boys like Keith were much more common in Marco's world than in mine; and that if this was the kind of boy Keith—my American friend—was, so be it. The world was what it was, and when you were from Vecchia Eri, you accepted it.

*"Vuoi venire con noi? Ho due archi e molte frecce,"* I said to Marco. *Do you want to come with us? I've got two bows and extra arrows.* Had Keith been able to understand it, it would have made him mad; but I said it.

*"Come no!"* Marco answered—"Of course!"—and this surprised me, though it shouldn't have. He might have to accept that the world was full of boys like Keith, but that didn't mean he had to be intimidated.

"He's coming with us," I said in English.

"No way!" Keith said.

"You've got a friend. Marco's mine."

"Where did you find him? He looks Sicilian."

"We went fishing with our teacher." That was a lie. It implied that Marco was in my class at school, and that he was not, as Keith would put it, a "peasant." But I wasn't going to give Keith what he wanted.

"Why would you go fishing with your teacher? He's got a lisp. What a fag."

I didn't say anything. I knew that arguing with Keith was hopeless, and that if Keith got angry and loud enough, my dad might appear and tell us we couldn't go.

I just stood there waiting, thinking about our teacher and how he waited, too, not trying to push things into happening.

"Ah, hell. He can come if you want him to, but he'd better not fuck things up."

I gave Marco one of my bows and a quiver of arrows—all new—and the four of us went in to see my father in the living room.

"Who's this?" my dad asked.

"Marco, a friend from the village."

"Well . . . Please tell Marco that I don't know enough Italian to say what I'm about to say in Italian, but that you can translate, Brad."

When I'd told Marco, my father looked at all of us, took a breath, and began:

"Boys, you can go to that cove, but you've got to follow these rules. If you don't and I find out later, you'll all be grounded. Keith's dad will back me up on this, I'm sure."

We waited. Keith looked ready to blow, so we were looking at him as much as we were my father.

"Find a place that's safe for shooting. Make sure there's a hill or cliff behind it so your arrows stop there. Make a line—a line you'll all shoot from—and no shooting if anyone's over that line, if anyone's between you and the targets. You've got paper targets, right? No one shoots if anyone's walking toward the targets, checking them, changing them. And no shooting at anything other than the targets—I don't care how tempting a tree or a shack or a wagon looks. Got it?"

We all nodded, even Keith, even Marco, who hadn't understood a word. "Got it," I said.

Outside, Keith said, "Yeah, right. Your dad's as candy-assed 'strack' as mine is. How do you stand him?"

I didn't answer. I knew we weren't going to do everything my dad had said—some of the rules were silly—but I liked my dad, even if I wasn't going to say so.

On the path to the cove, I tried to translate for Marco what my father had said. Marco's eyes rolled at one point when he realized how many rules there were, but he listened, helped me with some of the words, and nodded in that quiet way of his.

It took us no time at all to get there because it was downhill most of the way. About halfway—among the *villettas* where Keith and his brother had rung the doorbells so much they barely worked anymore—Keith's brother caught up with us, panting, bow and arrows in his hand, too. I'd never really seen him up this close. He had better things to do usually than hang out with us. He was tall, like his father, and thin and quiet, not at all as loud as Keith, and calmer, more confident—his eyes calculating, aware of everything around him. He had a small scar over his left eye, and a long scar on the back of his hand. Had he gotten them in fights, by rough-housing with Keith, or—at least the one over his eye—from a bad .22 aim?

Why he wanted to hang out with us that day, I had no idea, but he obviously wasn't embarrassed that he had a kid's bow in his hand. His was bigger than ours and the feathers on the arrows weren't so colorful, but it was still a kid's.

He was squinting down the path toward the cove, trying to see something, and we let him lead. Keith tried to stay alongside him, but before long was walking with us.

When we reached the bottom of the hill, where the cove started, the houses disappeared and the cobblestone path became dirt. Bobby was craning his neck looking for something not in the cove, but up between the hills. He said, "There's an old hospital up there. I want to see it."

None of us answered. Not even Keith.

I'd seen that hospital, I realized—at a distance anyway—but had forgotten it was in that cove. My father—as we'd driven to La Creccia one Saturday for a tennis party for the officers' families—had turned off the coast road and onto a gravel one that led up between the hills—"Just out of curiosity," he'd said. He loved taking side roads, and my mother never minded. We had time.

The gravel road had stopped at a little garden with a marble statue of a woman, and from there forked in two directions—one north to what looked like a big villa in the hills and the other south to a large building of some kind, much closer and down on the flat. You could see the building from where we sat in the car, and it looked old and abandoned.

"Who does this land belong to?" my mother asked. She'd probably ask the *Contessa* Carnevale, too, the next time they had tea at the Villa Carnevale in Romito; but maybe my dad knew.

"Don't know," he said. "That building is an old German hospital. Who owns it, I have no idea."

We turned the car around, and, as we left, I glanced back at the statue. It was a naked woman—a beautiful woman, too—so of course I was interested. She didn't look Greek or Roman; she looked more modern, "Romantic," as our teacher would say. Her hips weren't as big as classic statues made women's hips, and her thighs were thinner, her arms long and beautiful. This was all very exciting, of course—I was fourteen and statues like her were exciting—but the look on her face killed it. It was sad and wistful, not very exciting at all. Was she from a legend or myth, or was she someone who'd actually lived, someone long dead now? And why was she sad? Why would you want a sad woman greeting everyone on the road to your nice villa?

There wasn't really any way to cut directly from the dirt path through the olive groves to the hospital. There were old walls—some as old as the Etruscans, people said—littering the orchards, and it was a pain in the ass climbing over them. So, after a couple of minutes of trying, we returned to the dirt path and just walked until we found the gravel road, took it, and finally reached the little garden and the statue.

I stood staring at her. Her head was gone.

"You like tits, Brad? She's got nice ones." It was Keith, of course. "Hey, someone



took her head!" He laughed and his brother laughed too. Then they looked at each other, and I knew they'd been here before.

Someone had indeed taken her head away. It wasn't lying around anywhere that we could see. Why anyone would want the sad-faced head of a statue, I didn't know.

Bobby was walking up the fork toward the hospital, so we followed. I looked up once at the villa on the hill, but it was so far away—as if the hospital and it couldn't possibly be related—that I didn't really worry about anyone watching us. Without binoculars they wouldn't be able to see us.

When we reached it, the building was even bigger than it looked from the garden. It was wood and corrugated metal, big and tall, with lots of windows around the top of it to let light in, so that the light would fall on what was inside. It didn't look like a hospital. Why build one this way—just one floor, all those windows? Maybe it hadn't been a hospital originally. Buildings got appropriated during war. I knew that.

It was big and quiet and no one else was there. Birds whistled in the groves on either side of it. The sounds of the cars on the coastal road didn't reach this far. It was peaceful.

Bobby was already at the front door, which was unlocked, a big chain dangling from it, the lock that once held it in place long gone.

"I can't believe no one's ever been here," Keith announced. He meant kids—kids like us, or him and his brother. No one had used spray paint on the outside walls. No one had broken the high windows with rocks.

Bobby didn't answer. As if on a mission, he'd pulled the chain aside, opened the door, and stepped inside. We followed.

What I saw inside made no sense for a moment, and then it did. I'd been right. There was only one floor. The high windows let the light in, and it fell on a dusty, littered pavement. It had been a factory of some kind, but the machinery had been removed during the war. Cots must have covered the floor when it was a hospital, hundreds of them, with partitions that were no longer there, and tables for medical supplies and equipment, whatever hospitals had back then. Other than medicine and gauze and splints and surgery, what could you give wounded soldiers that might help them heal? You could give them sunlight—and the windows did that. Had it been a cold building, though? It had to have been, all that glass and the high ceiling; and you'd need blankets, lots of them.

Bobby was kicking at something, a piece of wood. There were no signs that anyone—beggars, gypsies from the south—had been here in recent times, lighting fires on the floor to stay warm or cook with.

The light from the high windows reached most of the floor, but in the four corners there were shadows.

Something made a noise, a tiny noise, in the corner nearest us, and we turned, waiting to hear it again.

"Rat?" I said.

"Who cares?" Keith said—as if this, like everything, were a test of his courage.

The sound came again, but not from the same corner. A creaking this time. The floor was cement. Only the building itself was wood. Why wouldn't an old wood building creak?

"More than one," Bobby said, snorting.

Keith went to the corner nearest us, kicked the litter around to show off, jumped when the creak came again—this time from the great beams near the ceiling—and walked back looking as nonchalant as he could.

"Scared now?" Bobby said to him.

"Fuck you," Keith answered.

"Fuck you too, dipshit." Bobby was laughing. Nothing scared him; that was obvious.



"Isn't that a table?" I asked. I could see a table in the shadows of the corner where Keith had kicked at things—the corner where the first sound had come from.

"Who gives a shit?" Keith said. "This is boring. Let's go back and knock that statue over."

"Can't," his brother said, looking up at the windows now. "It's bolted down."

So they'd tried. Were they the ones who'd taken the head?

This embarrassed Keith, and when Keith felt embarrassed, he got angry.

"What are you looking at?" he said to Marco, who was looking at both of them. Keith's friend was looking at them, too, but Marco was the annoyance—the one who shouldn't be along because I, not Keith, had asked him.

Marco didn't need to understand Keith's words. He knew the tone. He knew it better than I did. He simply shrugged.

"Nothing in here." Bobby was heading for the door. Keith followed, and in a moment, relieved, so did the rest of us.

We found Bobby standing on the side of a little hill beside the building, still looking up at the windows. "They're perfect," he said, and they were. Not one of them was broken—on this side of the hospital anyway. But that's not what he meant.

He notched an arrow—he seemed to know what he was doing—took a breath, and let it fly.

The arrow didn't shatter the window. It didn't bounce off it. It went through it like a bullet, making a hole about the size of your fist. I felt it go through. We all did. *A perfect hole in perfect glass.* This was even better—more exciting—than if the window had just broken. You couldn't do that with a rock. This was precision. We stared, amazed.

"All right!" Keith shouted.

"Beautiful," his brother whispered.

Then the guilt hit. This was *not* what I thought we were going to do today. It certainly wasn't what my dad thought we were going to do. And it was not what we *should* be doing. Trees or bushes or bottles or a shack or an ox cart—that was one thing, but this . . . an old building someone owned, perfect windows, ones we were breaking. I could hear my parents discussing it—trust, betrayal, "he's not the son we thought he was." *Vandalism*—which meant destroying something you didn't care about but that someone else did.

Not to be bested by his brother, Keith had notched an arrow, too, even as Bobby notched his second, and was letting it fly.

Neither Keith's friend nor Marco nor I were notching arrows. Not yet.

"I don't think . . ." I started to say. "My dad—"

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Keith said. "Why did you even come, Brad?"

That was the most shaming thing he could have said, and it worked. It meant: "You'll never have the courage. You'll never be a real man." Keith was a master at shame.

"I don't think—" I started again.

"No one cares what you think," he said.

"It's an abandoned hospital," Bobby was saying, not looking at me, though meaning it for me.

He was right. It was abandoned, and abandonment meant that no one cared—no one cared enough about it to keep it up. How could this be vandalism if no one cared? It wasn't as if we were going to set fire to the place. If Keith or Bobby started to do that, I'd run. I'd shout "No!" I'd take Marco with me and we'd run. I wouldn't be a part of *that*, and because I knew I wouldn't—I swore I wouldn't—

—it was easier to notch the first arrow.

And because I notched mine, Keith's friend and Marco notched theirs.

We all let fly. We were following one of my dad's rules at least. We were standing on

a hillside, in a line, and the windows were so high no one could possibly get shot. Wasn't that—safety—more important than the windows?

Keith and Bobby had more arrows than we did, so when we ran out, we just stood there watching them. Most arrows had hit windows, and we'd all tried to make sure—for the *perfection* of it—that each window had only one hole in it.

"Well, go get your arrows," Keith said smugly.

"Not if you're going to keep shooting."

"We're not going to keep shooting," he said. "You think we're stupid?"

I wanted to say, "No, but I don't trust you," but didn't.

"They're your arrows, too," I said instead. "Why don't you and Bobby come?"

"Because we don't need them yet."

Bobby wasn't saying a thing. He was looking at the windows, as if counting.

"Okay," I said instead, "but don't shoot."

"Jesus, what a wimp."

Bobby laughed at that, but was still counting. I looked at the windows. There were only two that didn't have holes in them. When we got back to the hillside, Bobby was going to take those two windows himself, I knew. Our shooting was over, and so was Keith's. We could always go to the other side of the building, but on that side we might be seen from the villa. We were done—unless of course Bobby said, "Screw perfection. Let's hit those windows with everything we have," and the one-hole-per-window rule no longer mattered. But I didn't think he would. He liked the perfection too much.

I started down the hillside to the building's front door, Marco and Keith's friend behind me.

Inside, arrows were scattered everywhere, and we started picking them up. Before we left the house, we'd all marked our arrows so we'd know who they belonged to—so that was no problem—but it was going to take awhile to find them all on a floor this big, littered as it was with wood, corrugated metal and other junk. Keith and Bobby would have to wait. We were the ones doing the work.

Just as Marco—who was standing about twenty feet away from me—picked up an arrow, looked at it, and said, "*Di qui sono le frecce con le croci?*" *Who do the arrows with crosses on them belong to?*—a window above us, one of the two that were still intact, cracked; and the arrow that passed through it arced slowly through the air, down through the sunlight, hitting Marco in the neck, near his shoulder.

Marco screamed. I may have screamed too. I don't remember. All I remember is Marco—pale, eyes frantic, hands shaking—grabbing at the shaft, wanting to pull it out, but not wanting to because when he touched it, it hurt too much. Keith's friend ran over and we both stood beside Marco. There wasn't much blood, but there was this arrow sticking out of him, and we didn't know what to do. We'd seen lots of westerns, but we still didn't. Did you try to pull it out? It didn't have an arrowhead on it. It was just a wooden arrow with a smooth metal tip on it. Could you pull it out safely? Were you supposed to wait and let a doctor do it? How could you pull it out safely if the person was trembling and might at any moment start screaming and flailing at you?

"Stop moving!" I said.

"*Che dolore! Che dolore!*" Marco was saying, but he wasn't crying. He was being strong.

"I know it hurts, Marco, but you've got to stop moving. It's in your neck."

We could hear shouting outside on the hill. Keith and Bobby had heard Marco's scream and knew why he was screaming.

They were inside in no time, running toward us, Keith without his bow, his brother still holding his. I jumped to conclusions.

"You shot him, you asshole!" I screamed at Bobby, not caring if it made him mad. "Keith said you wouldn't keep shooting and you did."

Bobby was looking at the arrow, at Marco's neck, Marco's face, how hard he was shaking. He took Marco by the arm—his good arm—and said, "We need to get him out of here."

"You shot him," I shouted again.

"No, I didn't," Bobby said. He didn't say it angrily. He just said it, as a fact, looking at Keith.

Then I knew what had happened. There had been only those two windows left. Keith had known his brother wanted them. Not to be bested, Keith had gone for one of them. Even though we were inside, he'd gone for it, thinking, "What's one arrow in such a big building and only three boys?" When he'd heard the scream, he'd dropped the guilty weapon.

"You said you wouldn't shoot," I said to Keith hoarsely. It was stupid to keep saying it, but I didn't know what else to say.

"Fuck you," Keith said back, and I thought he was going to hit me.

"We need to get him out of here," Bobby said again, his hand on Marco's good arm as he tried to guide him toward the door. "Tell him to stop wiggling, Brad. Tell him it's dangerous."

"I already did," I said, but did it again.

Marco did his best to stop wiggling, to not grab at the arrow again, and we were all heading toward the door—

When a figure, a woman, stepped from the shadows of the corner.

We stopped dead. Were we imagining this? No, it was definitely a woman, a young woman, and she was looking at us silently. Where had she come from? Was she the one who'd made the first sound, and had been watching us all this time? But Keith had checked that corner, hadn't he? He'd kicked litter around there, hadn't he? He'd have seen her. There'd been a table in that corner, nothing more, right? Or had he missed her in the shadows? Had she been sitting on the floor maybe, and he'd missed her? Why would anyone do that, though? Why would anyone, especially a woman, sit in the shadows of this building watching us?

Not knowing what else to do—you could tell that even Bobby wasn't sure how to handle this—we continued toward the door; but when we were almost to it, she stepped in front of us. She was smiling, and clearly she was not going to let us pass.

"Where the fuck did she come from?" Keith whispered.

She was wearing a little cape—a gray one. It was hot that day, but she was wearing a cape. She was crazy, that was obvious, or she wouldn't be here. She wore a dress, basically the kind all the young women wore on the *passeggiata* in the evening at the waterfront—the kind they'd been wearing for decades—and she was pretty, though her eyes were a little far apart and her lipstick wasn't on quite right. She was wearing a little cap, too—a cap made from the same gray cloth as the cape. She didn't seem scared of us, and she didn't seem frightened by what had happened to Marco. She seemed concerned, sure, but calm, as if this happened all the time, boys and arrows and screams and wounds.

What do you do with a calm crazy woman standing in your way in an old building? We weren't sure. We just knew we needed to get Marco out of there and to a real hospital.

"*Voglio aiutare*," she asked calmly.

"What did she say?" Bobby asked.

"She wants to help," I answered.

"Right," Keith snorted. "He needs a doctor."

"Yes, he does," Bobby said.

Marco was staring at her as if in a trance—as if this were all a dream. He was in shock, and in shock you can be awake but dreaming, too.

"Marco?" I said, and he didn't answer.

She was looking at him as if she knew him—which made no sense. How could Marco know her? *He* wasn't acting like he did.

"Let me help you," she said in Italian, and Bobby didn't ask for a translation.

She came over to them, and Bobby stepped back.

"What are you doing?" Keith said to Bobby. "She's crazy. We need to get out of here."

Bobby was staring at her as if in a dream, too.

She was close enough to us all that you could hear the rustle of her dress, smell her perfume, even smell the wool of her cape and cap—as if it were winter and they were wet.

She took Marco's good arm—Marco let her, and so did Bobby—and led Marco to the corner. We followed.

There was indeed a table there, and it wasn't empty. It was covered with all sorts of things, the very things I'd imagined had once been on tables here. Hadn't Keith seen them? First-aid things, gauze and bandages and needles and bottles of tablets and rubber tubing and thread for stitching.

"Those weren't there—" Keith started to say, but didn't finish.

The woman was pulling the table out into the light, and we were helping. She sat Marco down on a stool—the one she'd been sitting on in the shadows, I guess—and inspected the arrow, where it entered his neck above his T-shirt. With scissors from the table she cut away his shirt, and then, giving him something to bite down on—a thick wad of gauze—she pulled the arrow out carefully, watching the angle of it.

Marco should have been screaming, at least crying, but that would have embarrassed him; and besides, she was right next to him, her perfume in his nose, the smell of her clothes, too, and her touch, the touch of someone who seemed to care, even if she was crazy. He was looking up at her puzzled, but grateful.

She had a glass of water on the table, too—perhaps because she'd been thirsty, sitting there in the abandoned building all day. Who was she? Why was she here? Why did she have a table covered with first-aid things? Were there men, migrants from the south, living in these olive groves and she wasn't crazy at all; she was married to one of them and sat here in case one of them got hurt? Or was she crazy as a loon and did this because she thought she was someone else and was waiting for someone who'd never come? But if she was crazy, where was her family? Where did she live? Why did they let her do it? Alone in an abandoned building where men—men more dangerous than us—could stumble in one day and maybe hurt her?

She gave Marco three pills to take with the water, which he did, and did not try to stitch up the perfect little hole left by the arrow.

"*Ha bisogno di un'iniezione*," she said.

"He'll need an injection," Keith's friend—whose Italian was obviously better than the brothers'—said.

"Sure," Bobby said. He was looking impatient, as if the mystery of the woman had been only a moment's dream, and getting out of this place was what really mattered—which, for Marco's sake, was true.

"*Dovete portarlo subito in ospedale*," she said.

"Hospital, yes," Bobby said before anyone could translate it.

Then she said something that stopped my heart. She looked at Keith and Bobby, who were side by side now, cocked her head just a little, and asked gently:

"*Perche avete rimosso la testa della statua?*"

Keith and Bobby had no idea what she was saying, and it took me a second to find the courage to tell them.

"She wants—she wants to know why you took its head . . . the statue's head."

Keith jumped, and even Bobby, calm as he usually was, stepped back.

"What?"

She was waiting for an answer. Then she said: "*Perche? Perche la testa di una donna morta tanti anni fa e così triste nei suoi ultimi anni. . .*"

I looked at Keith's friend, but the Italian was beyond him.

"Why?" I began—wishing I weren't the one to have to do it. "*Why the head . . . of a woman dead all these years . . . and so sad during her final days. . .*"

Keith was looking at Bobby. Bobby was looking back. They'd both lost some color in their faces.

Keith said, "No one could have seen us—it was night. It was—"

"Shut up, asshole," Bobby answered. "Who cares if she saw us?"

As Bobby guided Marco through the door, and Keith—looking both afraid and angry—muttered what sounded like, "Bitch!" everyone followed, but I trailed behind. I couldn't help it. I couldn't stop looking at her, and neither could Marco. Even as Bobby pushed him through the door, he was looking back at her as if he did know her. A chill ran down my neck.

"*Lo conosce?*" I heard myself say to her. "You know him?"

"*Sì,*" she answered, her eyes on Marco. "*Lo conosco da sempre.*"

*Yes. I know him always.*

I'd never heard the expression before, and would never hear it again. *To know someone* always.

What she said next, her eyes still on Marco, I would also never forget:

"*Grazie per il regalo di lui.*"

*Thank you for the gift he is.*

The chill did not go away. I walked quickly to the door, not looking back. I didn't want to see what was in her eyes, even if it looked like love.

Afterward, the doctors said we'd done the right thing not letting Marco walk back to my house, but simply having him sit at the foot of the statue, keeping him awake, while I, since my Italian was better, ran to the nearest house on the path home and had them call my dad, who came in our car and drove Marco to the hospital in La Creccia.

The doctors also complimented whoever had removed the arrow and given Marco antibiotics—an old-fashioned kind, sulfonamides (Marco had one in his pocket still). When we said a woman in the old German hospital had done it, they thought we were drunk, I'm sure. We insisted. A woman had been there. "Well," they said, "she must have been a nurse. She knew what angle to remove it on, and the danger. The tip of the arrow was near the carotid artery. If she hadn't removed it and the boy had fallen on it. . . ."

A month later, when Marco's wound had healed, my parents said what I'd known they would say—that I had to go to the man in the villa, who indeed did own the old hospital and all the land up from the cove, and apologize in person. I was, after all, the son of a Naval officer and therefore an ambassador from America, though apparently not a very good one; and I needed to try to fix the damage. My dad would go with me, it was decided, and that was because Keith and his brother weren't going. They were back in school in Rome; and, rather than having them apologize in person to the owner, Commander Speer had paid the man three hundred dollars and returned the head of the statue, which Bobby had been keeping under his bed and Keith had decorated with some of his sister's lipstick. He was of course also paying for Marco's medical bills, since these would have been a hardship for any Vecchia Erci family.

You could tell from my mother's look what she was thinking when she heard that Commander Speer wasn't making his boys apologize in person. Maybe this is how fathers from families like that behaved, but this was not going to be how *we* were going to behave.

The owner told my parents that a face-to-face apology wasn't necessary, that he didn't need additional monetary compensation, that an apology on the phone was quite sufficient; but my father insisted. He and I would visit the owner the next weekend.

The same day my dad spoke to the owner by phone, I ran into Marco at the wharf. He had his fishing pole and I had mine; and my real friends—the ones from the “right” families—weren't with me because they didn't like to fish. It was that simple. Stamp collecting, maybe, and playing war in the olive groves, and soccer; but not fishing, especially from the wharf or *passeggiata* rocks, where people could see you and think you were a technical-school kid. “You're an American,” Carlo said. “You can get away with it.” I wasn't sure exactly what I was getting away with, but I went ahead and fished, and that day Marco was there.

When I told him what I had to do, that my dad would be accompanying me to apologize, he said, “If I go with you, maybe your father will not have to.” I could tell he felt bad about the windows, but I knew that wasn't the main reason he offered. We were still friends—even if friends usually don't get you shot in the neck with an arrow—and that meant something to him, as it did to me. He didn't ask whether Keith and Bobby would be going. He knew I'd have mentioned it if they were. He didn't even seem angry at Keith. Boys like Keith—and arrows falling from the sky—were to be expected, and you accepted them and went on with your life.

He was right, it turned out. If he came, my parents agreed, my father wouldn't need to. “That's very kind of Marco,” my mother said. A part of me was of course thinking that if the victim of the shooting was with me, the owner might not be as angry, but I certainly wasn't going to admit it.

When we reached the statue, it was still headless. The head hadn't been put back on yet. Could you even do it? Could you glue cement? She might be headless forever, and Keith and Bobby would have gotten away with murder again.

Instead of taking the gravel fork to the hospital, we took the one to the left, toward the villa, a much longer walk.

It wasn't a grand villa, like the Perraris' or the Carnevalis' in Romito, but it was fine enough. The man who answered the doorbell was businesslike, but not stern. He seemed young, maybe thirty—handsome, in good shape, with a wide-open shirt and a gold chain around his neck—but he was obviously the owner. He didn't have a butler or maid to answer the door, and he didn't seem to need one. He had money, but he was young, and that kept him from being stuffy, the way the old people in the bigger villas often were.

He shook my hand first; and when I introduced Marco—“*Voglio presentare a Lei mio amico, Matteotti Marco*”—he shook Marco's hand and looked at him for a long time. “You are the one struck by the arrow?” he asked at last. The *carabinieri*, we knew, had told him what had happened—at least the major points. This was not a world where people sued if something happened to them—something that was their own fault—on someone else's property, so the owner had not retained a lawyer. A boy had been shot with an arrow, a dangerous wound, but had survived, and that was what mattered.

“Si,” Marco answered.

The man led us to the travertine-marble living room, where we all sat down, the

man at ease, Marco and I nervous. The man didn't want us nervous. He smiled at us as we settled in, and soon we were feeling calmer.

"Matteotti?" he began in Italian to Marco. "The Matteotti of Erici?"

"Si," Marco said again.

The man looked at Marco awhile longer, and then said, "I think we are cousins."

Marco smiled. To have a cousin this wealthy, and to have such a cousin admit he was a cousin—that had made the trip worth it already. Maybe not the arrow, but certainly the trip.

Marco's Italian was better than mine, but I didn't want him to have to do the apologizing. My parents wouldn't have wanted it, and I didn't want it either. I was here to ask for the man's forgiveness and to offer to pay for my share (and Marco's, too) of the broken windows; and if I was going to go through this unpleasantness, I wanted some credit for it. That Marco had come along was his gift to me, and I didn't need any others.

In the best Italian I could, I explained that we had come to apologize. The man, whose name was Paolo—Paolo Pastore—was gracious enough not to interrupt, but to let me speak, even if it was a tediously slow and halting speech. But even after one sentence—a simple "I am (which Marco graciously corrected to "We are—") here to apologize for breaking the windows of your hospital"—I got into trouble and Marco had to help with some of the words. The owner just listened.

"We were very inconsiderate," I said, "and hope you will forgive us, *Signore*."

"I do," he answered.

"We would like to remunerate you—we would like to compensate you—for the windows; and not only for our share, but for any that might not be covered by the amount provided by the families of the other three boys."

"That will not be necessary," the man said, as if following his own script, too.

"Are you certain, *Signore*, that—"

"Yes," he interrupted gently, "I am certain. I would have preferred that the windows remained intact, simply because buildings deserve respect, as do people; but I will not be spending money on replacing the glass. The hospital will probably be torn down when we eventually sell the land. We were more disturbed by the damage . . . to the statue."

At that moment—and as his "we" made me wonder whether he was married or had a brother or had his parents living with him—a young woman appeared with orange sodas, real straw straws, and a plate of cookies. So he *did* have a maid, even if she hadn't answered the door. She wasn't dressed like a maid—she wore an ordinary dress—but she certainly acted like one. She wouldn't look at us, as if she were there only to deliver the drinks and cookies—the way a maid would. Maybe, I told myself, he didn't care about formalities like uniforms.

"Thank you," he said to her. "These are two of the boys from the hospital." She nodded, but did not look up, and in a moment had returned to the kitchen.

We drank from our bottles and we ate our cookies, and Paolo watched us, seemingly pleased.

"I hear," he said at last, "that someone helped you with the arrow. I'm very glad to hear that. Time is often of the essence."

"Yes," I answered. I thought Marco might say something then, too—about his famous arrow—but he didn't. He wanted the conversation to be mine.

"The arrow was close to a—an artery," I added, "so it had to be removed carefully."

"The police did not give me many details. I don't believe they had many. Was it someone from the coast road who stopped and helped you?"

I looked at Marco and Marco looked back. We'd assumed—everyone had—that he knew the woman in the hospital, or at least knew of her existence, and that by now he'd heard the entire story about the arrow. But if he didn't know the woman, and the *carabinieri* hadn't known the details. . . .



I didn't know where to begin.

I said:

"The woman was there in the hospital, and she was very helpful..."

He frowned, and was silent, as if trying to decide something.

"That must have been Gianna," he said at last.

Who was Gianna?

"Gianna is my sister."

We nodded. That certainly explained it. He had a crazy sister.

"But she took the arrow out of him?" This seemed to puzzle him.

"Si," Marco said. The memory of the woman who'd touched him, the one whose perfume he'd smelled, who'd looked at him with what could have been love—the woman who, it now turned out, was this man's sister—made him suddenly talkative. "She was very good at it, the doctors said. She knew exactly the angle at which to remove it."

The man was still frowning. "I—" he began, but then stopped. A door in the direction of the kitchen—a door to the outside, with a spring on it—slammed shut, and this seemed to set him free. The maid was gone. We could talk honestly now. He sighed again, and it was as if he were thinking: *Why not? These boys—especially the one with the arrow—who might be my cousin—deserve to know it, do they not?*

"Yes, that would have been my sister, Gianna," he was saying. "She goes to the hospital almost every day and sits there on a stool and listens for voices."

It was just what I'd imagined.

"She has emotional problems," he was saying gently. "She receives medication for them, and going to the hospital every day makes her happy. That Gianna didn't mention her role in what happened does not surprise me. She doesn't tell me everything—and I am not sure her memory is always accurate—but I am very happy she was able to help. It must—it must have made her feel very good to be able to help. . ."

He was, something told me, leaving things out. You could tell. He was speaking carefully, as if walking around a pond, trying not to step in the water.

Then he sighed. *Why not?* he was telling himself again. He liked us. That was obvious, and, again, Marco was probably family. *These are boys*, he was thinking, *and perhaps someday, when they are grown, this story will mean something to them, just as it has meant something to us.*

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As he began to tell the rest of it, he gazed out the window that overlooked the hills and the cove; and except for once or twice, when Marco had to repeat or rephrase things for me, he did not look at us.

His sister had done this—gone to the hospital every day—ever since their mother had died, he explained. Their mother had died five years ago, ten years after the war.

His sister went to the hospital to think of their mother, whom she missed terribly and without whom, in many ways, she could not find life worth living. Which was why the doctors had her on medication, and why Paolo had to make sure she took it dutifully. Was he worried about her when she visited the hospital? No, it was safe there—we were the first people ever to discover her—and she always returned from it contented, in less despair.

Their mother, who was from Erci, had felt and acted that way, too—in the years just after the war, in her final years of life. She too had started going to the abandoned German hospital soon after the war ended. As her daughter would after her death, she had set up a table and put medical supplies on it, as if waiting for wounded soldiers to come.

She had been a nurse during the war, one to whom a terrible thing had happened. Toward the end of the war she had been conscripted by the Germans to work at that hospital, a hospital for German officers. Because it was at the end of the war and because Hitler held *il Duce* in such contempt, blaming the Italians for many of his problems, only Germans could be treated in that hospital. Italian soldiers—even officers—would have to fend for themselves in whatever local clinic they could find, or in the overcrowded, undersupplied hospital near La Creccia many kilometers to the north.

Their mother was married, and had already given birth to both Paolo and his sister, who were fifteen and ten respectively. Her husband—their father—had been born in Sarzana, a town just inland from Erci, and they had met at a procession for St. Erasmus, Erci's patron saint, when they were twenty.

Their father was a foot soldier in the Italian army now, while their mother attended to German officers—and only German officers—at the hospital in this very cove. The children were being taken care of by their aunt, their mother's sister.

One night their father, Emilio Pastore, appeared at the door of that hospital. He had been wounded—wounded in his stomach—on the road from Parma to Erci, where he hoped to see his wife. He had not been shot by an American or other Ally soldier. He had been shot by a German, a German officer, and he had been shot because he had refused to do what the German had ordered—namely, that he turn around and return to Parma. Emilio had escaped and, bleeding, had made his way to the clinic in Erci, only to discover that it had burned down four nights before. He had then caught a ride on an armored personnel carrier to Creccia, but his wound was severe and he knew that he would not make it that far, or that even if he did, he might not survive long enough to see his wife, who was, after all, right here at this hospital.

When he appeared at the hospital's door, supported by two Italian soldiers—the infection in his stomach spreading like fire through dead grass—he barely recognized the world around him, but asked for Nurse Pastore. When she arrived, German guards would neither let her leave the building to help him nor let him enter to be ministered to, since the hospital was for German officers only.

Their mother had pleaded with the guards, and even with the director of the hospital, who had arrived to find out what the commotion was about. But he refused her as well, making her return to her patients even though she cried and hit at the guards. Three hours later word reached her through another nurse that her husband had died in front of the hospital, on the earth, and that his body was still there because the two Italian soldiers with him had been arrested and taken away.

Their mother never recovered. After the war, she lived in San Terenzo so that she might be closer to the hospital, which was soon stripped by thieves of its cots and tables and wiring and everything else of worth. When everything was gone, and no one cared about the building anymore, she began to visit it, to visit it every day, sitting at a little card table she hid in the shadows when she left, arranging her first-aid materials on it, waiting for her husband to come. Her sister continued to help her with the children, and when Paolo was twenty-five, he bought a shoe store for very little money, made a success of it, bought five more and did so well that in the very year that their mother died he was able to buy the land in the cove, the villa and the abandoned hospital, because it had mattered to her so much—

—just as it came to matter to his sister, who, not three months after their mother died, began to visit the hospital each day, too, using the same folding table and chair and what she brought with her for the table. She had always been an emotional child; but when their mother died, she seemed to disappear—to become, in her own mind, their mother—and if this was what God wanted from their lives, he as owner of the land and buildings and she the one who carried on their mother's vigil, how could he argue?

At his sister's urging, he had commissioned a statue of their mother—an honest one, one that did not hide her sadness, and the damage to it mattered, he repeated in closing, much more to him than the windows.

Marco and I were staring. We had stopped nodding long ago. Everything made sense now, and yet we had no idea what to say. "We're sorry." "It must have been difficult." "How hard war is." Nothing would sound right.

Paolo was looking at us, but I saw no regret—regret that he had shared such a story with two boys. Something had made him share it, and that something still made the sharing feel right.

"Please thank your sister for helping me," Marco said.

"I certainly will," the man answered, and then no one said a thing.

When the silence had gone on too long—when all we could do, and all he could, too, was smile—we got up and thanked him. He said, "You're entirely welcome," and we were heading toward the front door when we heard the kitchen door open and close again and footsteps approaching. We had reached the fireplace mantle—one with photographs on it—and of course wanted to see them, to see a picture of their mother and father, if they had them.

"You will find a picture of our mother on that mantle," Paolo said, as if reading my thoughts, "if you are interested."

We both were, said so, and looked; and the only photograph of a woman on the mantle made us stop.

The footsteps from the kitchen had arrived, and Paolo was saying, "*Ragazzi*, this is my sister, Gianna."

We turned. It was the "maid."

This was his sister?

This was not the woman in the hospital.

The woman in the picture on the mantelpiece was.

I looked at Marco and Marco looked back, and somehow Paolo knew. Perhaps he'd felt it one night. Perhaps he'd seen it in his sister's face one day, or on many days, when she'd returned from the hospital or was about to leave for it. *That she'd met someone there. That she hadn't really been alone.*

"No—" he said, shaking his head. "It was Gianna you met—who helped you. Gianna, you remember the boys, yes?"

The young woman, her eyes crazy—this was the reason she didn't look at people, I knew—glanced at us quickly and shook her head. "No, Paolo. I do not remember

them." She was holding another plate of cookies. "Would you like more, *ragazzi*? Would the boys like more cookies, Paolo?"

"Gianna is the one you met. She just doesn't remember—she is on medication—and because of the shadows and the commotion, you do not remember either. It is understandable. Marco was shot in the neck, a dangerous wound. The light, the commotion. . . ."

Neither of us said a thing. I looked back at the picture on the mantle—at the pretty face with wide-set eyes—and could almost smell her again. I wondered how often she'd gotten her lipstick wrong in the craziness of war, the wounded and dying soldiers, and whether she'd been wearing lipstick the night when her husband had come to the hospital.

"Thank you for coming over, boys," Paolo was saying, hurrying us toward the door. "That was very kind of you. Your families should be proud."

Marco was ahead of me. As we reached the door, Paolo touched my back to stop me, and in English—with a thick Italian accent—said, for me and me alone:

"The boy's name—the one who shot Marco—is 'Speer,' correct?"

"Yes."

"Is that name German?"

I didn't know why he was asking.

"Yes," I said in English too. "Yes, it is."

"Is his father an officer?"

"Yes," I said, still not understanding, but then seeing it at last.

Paolo was staring out through the window to the hills and cove once more, as if in a dream.

"Then Marco is indeed my cousin," he said quietly, still in English. "It could not be otherwise. Please tell him."

As we took the road back to my house, I thought of our hunchback teacher, how he had made what had happened possible, and wondered whether he somehow knew. I thought about the woman he cared for, whether she was still alive, or whether she called to him only from his heart. I wondered how far someone might go to hold onto what they loved.

Marco was asking what the owner had said to me in English. I answered that he'd thanked me for coming, that was all, and that he'd wanted to show off his English, too.

Marco didn't believe me. I wasn't lying well.

"That woman in the photograph—"

"Yes," I answered.

"Wasn't that the woman?"

"I don't know," I lied again. "It could have been her or it could have been his sister, I'm really not sure. He is right. There was a lot of commotion, and the light was bad. . . ."

"Is she still there?"

"Who?"

"That woman."

"I don't think so," I said. "I think she has gone now."

Marco stared at me as we walked. He knew I wasn't telling him everything; but he knew too that he would, just like me, have to make of what had happened that day in the hospital a story that somehow made sense to him and him alone, one that he could live with for the rest of his life. It would help him if I told him, but for some reason I couldn't. I couldn't tell him what Paolo had asked me in English that day—though many years later, married and with children of my own, I would write a story, one very much like this one, spend months finding where he lived (it would be Vecchia Erci still), and send it to him, so that he might at last know the truth about love. ○

David Erik Nelson is co-author (with Morgan Johnson and Fritz Swanson) of “Ask the Giant Squid”—[www.squid.poormojo.org](http://www.squid.poormojo.org)—the ongoing serialized advice and memoirs of a sinister and deathless *Architeuthis dux* living in Detroit, Michigan. Links to David’s Twitter feed and other projects are available at [www.davideriknelson.com](http://www.davideriknelson.com). Readers may get a taste for what the author has to offer at his website from the outré escapade of the cephalopod in . .

# THE BOLD EXPLORER IN THE PLACE BEYOND

David Erik Nelson

“**S**o, that lil squid, the bold explorer, had just knocked his whole damn operation into a cocked hat, is what he’d done.” That voice came chopping out of the crisp spring dark and scared the tar out of me. I’d been creeping down to peep into the windows of Two-Ton Sadie’s Dancehall—catch me a look at them dancing girls she’s got—when that crippled ole Johnny Reb, Dickie Tucker, came bellowing out of the dark alley alongside the General Mercantile Emporium, bottle in hand. He stomped up to Rev. Habit’s First Church of the Latter Day Saints, and I went hopping into Sheriff Plume’s high hedge like a jackrabbit.

The fat, spring moon gleamed on Dickie’s single good eye and made plain the hard fist of scars clenching the right side of his head as he hectored the big double doors of Rev. Habit’s church. He looked like the Devil’s own fist hammering down the Lord’s door.

“That lil squid had kitted hisself together a clever ole clockwork diving engine—an *undiving* engine. Looked like a lil crab stitched outta scraps of copper, rubber, and greased leather.” Dickie made obscure gestures in the air, like he was telling a Chinaman how to put together a pump head, but I already had a notion of what his *bold explorer* looked like: Like them Union automatic clockwork soldiers that keep their camp up on Windmill Mesa, now that they’s retired from Sherman’s dreaded First Mechanical Battalion. Word was that Dickie’d lost his face to a clockie platoon at the Battle of Atlanta. No one knew if that was true—you couldn’t hardly talk to Dickie Tucker, no more than you could talk to a rabid dog, but the way he lashed into the clockies when he’d see them in the street . . . it seemed credible.

"Started okay: The bold explorer, he'd crept up out of the water, peering from behind a curved shard of a Chinese blowed-glass fishing float, not knowin' what to expect of the Place Beyond. He'd clicked and clacked up out of the surge and scuttled into the sedges, not just blinded by the clean, pure light of that slitted sliver of moon, but by his sense of wonder and terror. He'd skidded right through the scintillant edge of everything, and was still live and sane." Dickie wavered in the street and held his bottle up to see its level in the moonlight. I couldn't see how much he had, or had had, or would have. Probably God couldn't, neither. Behind him, the dancehall thumped and jangled. With its swaybacked roof and lit up windows, it looked like a November jack-o-lantern gone soft, waiting to fall in on itself.

"Before he'd even gotten over congratulating hisself on bein' so damn brave and clever," he told the bottle, "the bold explorer had already bumbled his way through the thickets of sharp bentgrass, tumbled down the backs of the dunes, and stumbled into the forest." Dickie took another slug.

"The forest was thick," he said, taking the church steps like he was charging a trench through a mucky field, "and the leafy branches of the old beeches and buckeyes cut the glare off the moonlight. His lil optically perfect eyes could focus again, and he saw a sick world of wonders. It was crowded with what he took for corals and anemones, but these reefs was fishless and vacant, the piebald corals bleached of their living color, the anemones listless. No wonder, he thought, that the few that got pulled up through the Silver Edge came back broken and dead, and the survivors mad; the Place Beyond was a dead world." Dickie knelt shakily, set down his bottle on the top step, and peered through the door crack like he was peeping on Jesus in the bath. Then he started to whisper into the doorknob.

"The bold explorer's lil legs whirred and clicked as he scuttled through the dry leaves," Dickie crawled the fingers of his left hand over the wooden door, like a giant spider tickling a lady's bottom over her silk knickers, "whirred and ticked as he scrambled over logs, whirred and tocked as he skittered over knobby old roots. Even if it was a dead world, there was still much to see, and he aimed to look his fill while he had the chance. He was slipping into a dip under a big ole uprooted paper birch when his suit whirred and sproinged, and one of his front legs gave out limp." Dickie made his index finger flop lamely, "He stopped in his tracks, and gave the leg a test jiggle. It did nuthin'. He gently tested the other seven; two more sproinged. He backtracked up out of the dip, but was hardly clear of the tree's lee when the suit *crack!ed*" he clapped his hands, "sproinged, whirred, whistled, and keeled over." Dickie's left hand dropped dead on the church's wide top step. "He rolled a half turn, and looked up through a break in the canopy at the drowsy, half-lidded moon." Dickie himself rocked back on his heels, almost tumbling down the steps, then spun and planted his skinny hams on the narrow threshold. He leaned back into the door's embrace, closed his eye, and basked in the spring moonlight.

"Soon enough," Dickie grunted, "bold explorer discovered that the forest wasn't so empty like he thought. But 'til then, he had hisself a time to lay out orderly how he'd got where he was. If there's such as sin, then the bold explorer, his sin was *pride*. All his days, as a young squidlet at the bottom of the goddamn sea, he'd been too *fancy* to socialize proper with all them other lil squiddies. When they'd spurt up to ask him to play at races and crack-the-whip, or to twirl it up at the annual squid cotillion, he was always too busy studyin' up and schemin' on his glorious *Future*. He's too busy to even be proper and polite and express his *regrets*, and so it wasn't too soon before every other lil squid stopped tryin' to pal up to him. Not that the damn thick bastard even might notice." Dickie opened his eye and there was fire in it. He shot to his feet, and shouted in the moon's face.

"'cause ole Mr. *Fancy Pants* had him a notion that there was somethin' worth know-

ing up beyond the undulant, silver top edge of the waters, somethin' more than plain, ole Death. The squids, they all *knew* there was somethin' out Beyond, but didn't reckon it was somethin' worth knowin'. Why? 'cause on account now and again some poor damn bastard would get caught in a net, or lay into a baited hook, and get whisked up clean out of their world. Mostly, that was the end of the story. Occasionally, his corpse might get coughed back out, limp and torn. And very, very, very . . ." his steam had run down. Dickie seemed like a locomotive that might start rolling back down hill, devil may care and no survivors when it jumps track. He took the steps back down in a loose-limbed trot, then looked at his hands quizzically.

"Very, very rare," he mumbled absently, looking about him on the ground, "that unlucky squid would come back live. But what he could say of what he'd seen . . ." Dickie finally caught a glimpse of his bottle, left neglected on the church steps, and his single eye sparkled, "There weren't much to it. It was crazy babble," Dickie leaned over the steps, laying out across them, snatched up his hooch, and took a long, reflective gulp before standing. "He'd tell 'em, of a *thin* place up above and beyond the world, a searing place of blinding light, of roars and shudders, of helpless flopping and hopeless incomprehensibility. All them other squids pitied these madmen that had seen the Place Beyond. And, jus' like us, sayin' they *pitied* these luckless travelers is to say they *ignored* them."

Dickie rubbed his face, then knuckled his good eye. "But the bold explorer," he sighed, "he lacked the good goddamn sense to ignore crippled lunatics."

Dickie rocked on his heels, staring into the moon, and then muttered, "He was a brave, dumb sonofabitch. I'd pity the bastards too. Pity 'em all."

Dickie strutted up the street, like an actor across the boards. He took a deep breath and blew out his contemplative mood. "And then," he kicked a horse apple, aiming for Sheriff's door. It pounded into the bushes where I crouched, off to my left, "As the bold explorer laid there, thinkin' on his progress, cats oiled in on the darkness, like eels 'cross ice. Feral old toms, refugees from a torched plantation. One still wore his leather collar, which was cracked and dry, but had its silver bell. Though tarnished black, that bell tinkled high and pretty in the moon-bright night." He kicked another turd. "Not that the bold explorer could hear." And it went extremely wide, skittering up the street, "They was cats and didn't know much, but they remembered the sorts of fancy food what came out of cans and jars, once upon a time, afore them clockie sons-abitches brought their fire down through Atlanta and clear to the sea." He kicked another turd, hard. It disintegrated to a mist of manure on impact with his boot toe, but he still squinted into the distance to see where it had landed.

"Them cats flowed out of the dark and knotted around the bold explorer who, bless his stupid heart, was glad to see 'em. He watched the cats glide through the air, slick as fish, and blushed a warm *hello* and gracious salutation, such as you might to diplomats and ambassadors. 'course," he kicked, and a horse apple shot into the bush directly above me, raining down leaves and filth, "they didn't give a good God damn for greetings. Them toms couldn't even imagine the full-color skin semaphore that's squid talk. All they saw was pretty fish in a Mason jar." Two more horse apples came in quick succession, cutting right into the trail of the last, and dusting me with stink to match my regret.

"But the bold explorer, he just kept grinnin' like a blue-ribbon asshole, and flashin' his *howdy-do?*, and swirlin' his embarrassed relief, and jiggin' an excruciatingly boring explanation of his predicament. He was explicating his situation when the first swat knocked him and his little bubble of sea into the brush." Dickie cracked his hard palm smartly across his thigh, "And they was off to the races. The trio of toms swirled off into the forest, drivin' that squid in his clockwork divin' bell before 'em like injuns runnin' buffalo off a cliff. They went ricochetin' off trees, tumblin' down banks and sprintin' up hills. Soon as they started they'd lost the sense of the goal of the task, and was just run-



nin' after the savage joy of it. Once that dome cracked the party'd be done, and maybe they'd mourn the loss of the game, but a full belly goes a long way to soothe a sad heart. Least when you's livin' rough." Dickie made to drink, but lost his grip. The bottle tumbled to the dirt. He shook his head, watching his tonic glug away into the rutted lane. Sadie's thumped and rocked, like a distant train passing on a track that don't go nowhere near your town. The girls all whooped together, high and pretty, and the sound of it in the spring night made my heart crinkle till I was near to crying.

"But the cats," Dickie said, "They didn't get their supper. They was all legs and cart-wheels, time a-their life, when somethin' big and angry, somethin' that wanted what they had, pounded up the brush and loosed a single screechin' roar. Stopped them three toms dead in their tracks, and sent 'em yowlin' to the four points of the compass, leaving the bold explorer to rock and froth and shudder to rest among the roots and bracken."

Dickie squatted shakily and dabbled his fingers in the puddle of booze that was mingling with everything else in the street—hog slop and horse piss and cowflops and God even don't imagine what. "The cats' yowls and ruckus drifted off into the night, with the tinkle of that age-black silver bell followin' after," he brought his fingers to his mouth and my guts clenched up tight and greasy. He scowled, then nodded.

"Soon, out from the brush, crept the 'possum, gopher, and two squirrels who'd made that racket." Dickie got shakily to all fours, "They circled up 'round the bold explorer. His little undiving engine was worse for wear: Three of the legs was gone altogether, with toothy gears and useless snarls of spring-steel protruding from their empty sockets. The other five were twisted beyond all hope of repair, bent back and around the dome of his lil' anti-bathysphere like the green sepals pulled up around a dandelion's fluff." He carefully lowered his face to the puddle. "The glass was still whole—maybe for the luck of being shielded by them bust up legs—but there was a trickle of water running out from between the tarred plates on his undercarriage." Dickie was bringing his lips to the dirt-flecked surface of that grotesquely filthy whiskey puddle when the better angels of his nature reared their heads. My guts hitched into my throat and stuck there, even when Dickie flopped onto his backside instead of slurping up that mess. He sighed like an abandoned dog.

I was scared of getting skinned by my pa, and scared of Dickie Tucker, and sick sad that I was missing on seeing those dancing girls that Pa calls "prairie nymphs," like the words are a mouthful of spoilt milk. Maybe they're cheap trash, but to see them twirling in the light of a hundred candles, their curls shining, to see them lounge against the bar like cats, to see their legs and arms and necks, to see their coyness that ain't coy when they set hand to a man's arm or chest—it's warm and dizzy and worth any kind of scared. It settled my gut, thinking about them.

"The bold explorer himself was bruised all to hell," Dickie said, "with one eye swelled shut like a county fair pugilist, but he's just as optimistic as ever. He smiled tentative, then blushed and wigwagged his color-talk, 'splaining how he'd got there—which they knew plain enough, from seein'—and askin' their help in diagnosing the ailments of his suit—which was beyond their capacities." Dickie stood and turned back toward the church doors, serendipitously catching sight of his dropped bottle. A bare inch of liquor lay in the curve of the bottle's belly, and Dickie perked up seeing it. "All's to say that it was probably just fine that they couldn't understand a damn thing he said." Dickie scooped up the bottle and drained her.

Though it seems unlikely, Dickie was even less steady on his feet than before, pacing careful, his eyes glued to the dirt. He brought each step to bear with ferocious concentration, as though he expected the ground to squirt out from under foot.

"The squirrels, 'possum, and whistlepig held a lil powwow, and agreed that they didn't know what in the hell they'd stumbled into, or where it belonged. They figured it was some manner-ah tadpole 'r salamander, and needed water, which it was quick-

ly runnin' shy on in its leaky fishbowl." Dickie stood at the base of the steps, staring down the doors.

"The bold explorer smiled hopefully up at his saviors, even as the water level inched down his dainty, color-swirled mantle."

Dickie undid the buttons on his pants, and proceeded to loose a powerful stream on the church steps, his hands, and his trousers, sighing his satisfaction.

"These four crusaders had never seen the sea, nor had any notion of it, so they did best they could," Dickie buttoned up crooked, then rubbed his face, like a night watchman warding off sleep. "They hauled him up, set him on their shoulders, and carried him, like a fallen hero, to the charred ruins of the plantation house. Round back, down to the old slave shacks, the 'possum and whistlepig cradled the bold explorer. He's beamin' at all he'd saw, and what he'd see yet, imaginin' his hero's welcome back to the sea, his lecture circuit on the Place Beyond. The squirrels scabbled up to the crumblin' lip of the old well. The 'possum and groundhog heaved the lil suit up—weighed almost nuthin', what with most of the water drained away—and the squirrels hauled it over, and dropped it down. The bold explorer tumbled into the dark with the moon's silver light frostin' the copper and glass, shinin' in his perfect, expectant eyes. It was a thin slice of moon, a droopin' eye, like a lazy God almost sorta watchin' over his passage. Then he was gone."

Dickie stood, swaying like he was on a foundering frigate.

"He didn't make no sound on the way down, but he splashed when he hit bottom."

Dickie fixed the big double doors with a baleful stare.

"The four a-them standin' in the moonlight looked down inna that well. They knew they hadn't done right, 'xactly, but they'd done best they could." His breath hitched, like he might sick up, "Didn't feel much good 'bout it, tho'."

Dickie took a breath, looked as to continue, but instead passed out. His right knee buckled while the left held, and he twirled like a ballerina before flopping on his back into the lane's filth.

We sat together, alone in the dark. Dickie snorted. Down the lane, lady laughter bubbled out of Sadie's. I shivered, even though the night was warm.

I wanted to help Dickie home, but his place is so far west of town that doing so would have meant getting caught out for sure. And the fact is, I wanted—I needed—to have my look at Sadie's gals, I needed to go get my fill, even though I knew: Needing to see is where the trouble starts; ain't no amount of looking that fills you.

Besides, sleeping out couldn't possibly bother Dickie Tucker; sleeping in his crumblin' shack wasn't much better than sleeping out. At least on the church steps he had fresh air and the Lord watching.

But it didn't matter. I was still tangled in Sheriff's hedge when I heard clicking and clanking come from the darkness out west of the church. I looked up and seen that it was four clockies from the bunch that make their camp up on Windmill Mesa, refugees and veterans of that same Long War that had taken Dickie's good right eye. They looked down at Dickie, their eyes glowing like pairs of coals peeking out from a stove grate. One hunkered and nudged Dickie, who snored deep and didn't stir. The croucher clicked at his mates, and one tick-tocked off, returning with a wheelbarrow snatched from the side of Emet Kohen's Mercantile Emporium. They hauled Dickie up, then wheeled him down the lane, right past my nose. Dickie smelt terrible of manure and I can't even guess what, but the clockies were clean. They smelled like coppe and gun oil, and water from the springs way back in the box canyons.

As he was wheeled past, Dickie's one good eye rolled open. It fixed on me blearily, and he mumbled, "Go have yer look, Seth Everett. Couldn't *possibly* do no harm."

At the next alley the party cut west, into the darkness, and if they dumped Dickie back into his own pitiful sod hut, or rolled him right past, all the way to their neat homestead on top of Windmill Mesa, I really can't say. ○

# THE WIND-BLOWN MAN

Aliette de Bodard

Aliette de Bodard lives in Paris, where she works as a computer engineer. In between coding sessions, she writes speculative fiction: her short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Fantasy Magazine*, *Interzone*, and *Realms of Fantasy*. Aliette was a Campbell Award finalist in 2009. Her first novel, the Aztec fantasy *Servant of the Underworld*, was recently released by Angry Robot. She tells us her first story for *Asimov's* began "as a thought experiment on what science and space travel would be like if the Chinese had become the dominant culture on Earth—and then sort of morphed along the way."

**O**n a clear day, you could almost see all the way into Heaven.

That was what Shinxie loved about White Horse Monastery: not the high, lacquered buildings scattered across the mountain's face like the fingerprints of some huge Celestial; not the wide courtyards where students sat like statues, the metal of their second-skins gleaming in the sun; but the clear, crisp air of the heights, and the breathless quiet just before dawn, when she could see a flash of light overhead and imagine it to be the reflection of Penlai Station.

In those moments, she could almost imagine herself to be free.

That was, of course, before the first bell-peal echoed across the mountains, calling all the students to the meditation halls; when the stillness of dawn was shattered by the sound of dozens of bare feet, and the smell of incense and cinnabar wafted down to where she sat, a perpetual reminder of her exile.

That morning, as on all mornings, she pulled herself up, wincing at the ache in her calves, and began the climb upward. Soon, she'd have to begin her examinations. By the looks of it, there were at least one or two students who might have achieved the perfect balance: fire and wood, earth and water and metal in perfect harmony within—two more, ready to take their gliders and transcend into Penlai Station.

She was thinking of the second one—Fai Meilin, a short, skeletal woman whose bruised eyes looked almost incongruous in her serene face—when she saw the glint of sunlight.

Penlai Station, winking to her again? But no, the glint came again, and it was larger, spinning itself out of nothingness, layer after layer carefully superimposing itself on reality, until a glider flew out of the singularity in the sky, the slender silhouette underneath shifting to accommodate the strong headwinds with the liquid grace of a Transcendent.

She stood, stared at the glider—hoping it would go away. But it did not. It remained

stubbornly there, floating toward the monastery, a patent impossibility. One transcended—became one with the universe, knowing, for a brief moment, how to be everywhere at once before dematerializing on Penlai Station, in the company of peers. One did not, could not descend. That was impossible.

The glider was coming closer to her, its rider maneuvering the metal wings with casual effortlessness. His face, shining under the second-skin, tilted toward her, and somehow the faceted eyes met her, and pierced her like a spear.

For a moment more, she hung indecisive; and then, with a shudder, she broke the contact and ran up the mountain, abandoning all protocol and decorum, calling out for the guards.

Shinxie pressed her hand to the door, waited for the familiar tingle of recognition that traveled through her palm—and slid it open.

Inside the holding cell, the Transcendent was sitting cross-legged in a pit of sunlight, showing no inclination to move or escape. He'd abandoned his glider soon after landing, and now looked oddly bereft, as though something vital had been torn from him. But, of course, that was only illusion. The gliders were more for the protection of White Horse than for the Transcendents: no one wanted to take the risk of a failed singularity opening within the monastery.

Shinxie sat cross-legged in front of the Transcendent, unsure of what to say. The faceted gaze rose to meet hers, incurious—following her movement as if by instinct. His aura saturated the air: the five elements in perfect balance, nothing standing out, no emotion to be read or perceived.

She couldn't help shivering. She'd grown too used to the implants in her palms, relying on her ability to read auras to understand people. But he . . . he was a Transcendent, through and through: nothing remained, no desire, no interest, no care for anything. He'd let go of his self—the only way he'd be able to open a singularity and lose himself into it.

"I know who you are," she said. Carefully, she laid the papers she'd been holding on the floor between them. "Gao Tiegua, from the Province of Anhui."

The eyes blinked, briefly; the head was inclined, as if in acknowledgement.

"Your family was outlawed after you wrote memorials against the Tianshu Emperor, may he reign ten thousand years." She closed her eyes. "You came here in the fifteenth year of the Tianshu reign. I—helped you transcend."

She should have remembered him better, but even the faded likeness on the file hadn't brought back any memories. She'd have been newly appointed as Abbess of White Horse, still bitter at her expulsion from the Imperial Court: she'd done her work like a chore, laying hands on students every morning, reading the balance of their humors as if in a butterfly-dream—and forgetting them as soon as they'd left her office.

The head bowed to her again. "You did help me, Honored Abbess," the Transcendent—Gao—said, the first words he'd pronounced since returning.

His voice was low, broken by disuse; and yet, in the pauses between the words, lay an abyss of untapped power.

"Why have you come back?" Shinxie said. And, when the eyes still did not move, "It's not possible, to do what you did. You cannot descend . . ."

Gao's hands moved, as if to a rhythm of their own. His second-skin stretched between the fingers, creating a softer transition like a webbed foot. "Do you presume to know everything?"

She was no Westerner or Mohammedan, to view the world with boundless arrogance, presuming that everything must cave in to reason. "No. But some things among the ten thousand have explanations."

"This isn't one of them." Gao smiled, vaguely amused—she'd seen the same ex-

pression in her terminal students, except not quite so distant and cold. She hadn't thought she could feel chilled—by a former student, of all people—but then she'd never been made so aware of how different the Transcendents were.

Shinxie reached for the paper, steadied herself with its familiar touch. "You're going to have to explain it to me."

"I fail to see why."

Had he lost all awareness of Earth? But no, she knew the answer. To transcend was to detach oneself from the real world, measure by measure—until no other destination remained but Penlai, where all desires, all emotions had lost meaning.

"You're a child," she said, feeling cold certainty coalesce within her. "With the powers of a Celestial. You could will yourself anywhere in the world—within the Censorate, the Forbidden City—even in the Imperial Chambers . . ."

"If I willed it so."

For a moment, she stared at him. His face under the iridescent second-skin was almost featureless: only the eyes, protected by their thick facets, retained a semblance of life. His mouth—a bare slit—was impassive, expressionless.

"You're never going to make them believe that you don't want to do this."

"To want, even the smallest thing, is to desire." Gao inclined his head. "And desire is impure."

Shinxie shivered—thinking of the Sixth Prince's touch on hers, of the hands stroking the curve of her back—before they were found out, and the Imperial Edict shattered her life. "You're—" she started, and then realized that he was right. Desire, love, tenderness—it was all an expression of the self, and only those who had no self could open the singularities.

"You haven't changed, then," Gao said.

He said it so matter of factly that it took his words a moment to sink in. "What do you mean?" she asked—though she knew, like ice in her guts, that he already knew.

"You have never transcended."

And she never would; and she'd known it even before the Tianshu Emperor sent her there. She'd known it as she'd watched the Sixth Prince just after the Edict's proclamation, his face frozen in what might have been grief, what might have been anger—a memory warm enough to last for a lifetime. "No," she said. "I have made my peace with that."

Gao inclined his head again—could he even feel ironic, or amused? No, of course not; he couldn't—and that was what frightened her so much. Lust burnt and destroyed the world, and duty compelled, maintaining the structure of the universe; but he was beyond either of those, so far away from the living creatures he might as well have been a rock, or a waterfall.

"Why have you come back?" she asked. "Something had to draw you here. Something had to make you return." He had to have found a way around the constrictions of the Transcendents; some trick to bend the rules to his will.

But Gao sat, and smiled, and said nothing.

"If I can find no explanation, someone else will come," Shinxie said. "Someone with fewer scruples than I."

But, no matter how hard she pressed him, she obtained nothing but that enigmatic smile—the same one teasing up the corners of her students' lips, the same one carved on the statues of all the Celestials in their temples.

In the end, weary of his silence, she left him, and retreated to the safety of her room—where she began composing, with painstaking eagerness, a missive to the Imperial Court, explaining what had happened, and humbly pleading for guidance.

She had to pause for a moment at the transmitter, her hand frozen on the controls—it had been so long since the last communication between White Horse and

the capital that she'd forgotten the proper protocol. But the lights shimmered on the panel; the humors swirled within the machine, until a single spike of wood-humor surged through the antenna; and the reassuring hum of an outgoing transmission soon filled the room.

The Court's answer was curt, and almost instantaneous: *Wait. Someone will come to you.*

The Sixth Imperial Prince arrived with all the pomp due to one of his rank: a row of attendants, the metal of their engineered arms glinting in the morning sunlight; a few advisors, their gazes distant and contemptuous; and, finally, at the end of the procession, the Prince himself, a short, plump man of middle age, who looked curiously at every building in the monastery, as if working out a particular literary or alchemical problem.

The students, the alchemists and the teachers had all assembled in the Hall of Cultivating the Body and Mind, the teachers and alchemists looking almost colorless next to the students—their second-skins shimmering in the sunlight, so strongly Shinxie could almost imagine the whirlwind of humors beneath the alchemists' modifications.

As abbess of the monastery, Shinxie was the one who welcomed the Prince—standing in the center of the Hall, under the ever-shifting pictures of successful Transcendents.

"Your Excellency." Shinxie abased herself to the ground, in the prescribed position for welcoming a son of the Emperor—her chest pressed against the stones of the floor, her head lowered, her gaze down—she couldn't afford to look up at him, couldn't afford to meet his eyes.

She found, to her dismay, that she was shaking. Ten years past, and a whole world between them, and she couldn't even quiet her memories and her desires enough to respect protocol. What a waste.

"Yue Shinxie." The Prince's voice was low, with the cultured accents of the Court. "You may rise. There's no need to stand on ceremony here."

From where Shinxie lay, she heard the sharp, shocked intake of breath course through the ranks of the assembled teachers and students—how could the Prince set aside protocol, unless he had some previous acquaintance with her? She could only guess at the questions she'd have to face later, the idle speculations at the noon rice and in the quiet hours after evening, the subtle accusations spreading like wildfire among the students.

But then, none of that mattered, because she was rising on stiff knees, to meet the Prince's gaze. He hadn't changed in ten years—aged a little, with new wrinkles on the moon-shaped face, a few lines pulling his eyes into sharper almonds. But the same presence emanated from him: the palpable charm and aura that underlined every one of his postures. She knew, of course she knew, that the imperial alchemists had worked on him while he was barely in his mother's womb—and she knew that, if she laid her hands on him, her implants would feel the engineered humors pulsing, combining into the melody of seduction—but it didn't matter, it had never mattered. Her throat was dry, her breasts aching as if with milk.

"You'll want to see him," she said, struggling to bring her mind back to the present.

The Prince inclined his head, gracefully. "Of course. Walk with me, will you, Yue?"

Protocol would have put him in front of her—but protocol had to give way to practicalities; for, of course, he had no idea where the holding cells were. She walked slightly in front, head bowed, trying not to think of his presence behind her—of the hands that had once traced the contours of her body; of the lips, moist and warm, sending a quiver of desire arching through her body like a spear.

There were no other footsteps: neither the attendants nor the advisors had followed them, and the others in the monastery had gone back to the flow of their lives.



"You're happy here," the Prince said. There was a hint of wood in his aura—a hint of enquiry, barely perceptible unless one knew him well.

Shinxie sucked in a slow, burning breath. "Of course," she said.

"Shinxie." He gave her name the edge of a blade.

She stopped, still not daring to look at him. "My work is here," she said. "Helping them transcend."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"No," she said. "You were the one who once said that happiness wasn't our fate, Your Excellency."

"Your Excellency? Is this what it has come to?"

It wasn't, and he knew it—he had to know it, to see something on her face, in her bearing, of the confusion of humors within her. "I'm sorry," she said, finally. "But it's been a long time."

"It has." Was the quiver in his voice bitterness, or regret? She'd never been able to read him properly; she, the physician, the empath, the one who could always know what her students were thinking, who could always open the book of their lives with the mere touch of her hands.

"Why did they send you? There are many Princes, and even more censors."

The Prince did not speak for a while. Their path crossed the Pavilion of the Nesting Phoenix, where the hum of the alchemists' machines made the slats of the floor tremble underfoot. "They could have sent someone else," he said, with something like a sigh. "But I asked."

The shock of his answer was like cold water. "You—"

The Prince shook his head. Before them stretched the Corridor of Stone, and the rows of holding cells, all doors half-open—save one. "I wanted to see how you were, Yue."

The hint of hunger in his voice made her uncomfortable—as if something were not quite right with the world. He had always sought what he needed, taken what he wanted; but never had he let protocol lapse, except for that one unguarded moment after the Edict. "As well as can be," she said, carefully. "I trust you are well."

The Prince did not look at her. "I have three wives, and have been blessed with seven sons and three daughters."

That was no answer. "I see," Shinxie said. She laid her hand on the door, wondering why she felt so empty inside. "Let's see him, shall we?"

Gao's eyes flicked up when they entered, but he showed the Prince even less interest than he'd shown Shinxie. The Prince, if he was angered by this lack of protocol, showed nothing—sitting cross-legged on the floor with Shinxie by his side.

"Gao Tiegua," the Prince said. "Do you know why I am here?"

"This humble person would not presume," Gao said. His face was blank, the second-skin like gleaming cloth over his features. "Your Excellency." He used the word and tone suitable for addressing a high-ranking member of the Imperial Court.

"Deference," the Prince said, as if pondering a particular problem. "That's something to work with."

Gao bowed his head. "I assume you'll ask me the same question the Honored Abbess did."

The Prince inclined his head, looking at Gao. "No," he said, finally. "The wise man knows better than to travel well-worn roads. I'd find nothing more than she did."

"Enlighten me," Gao said, gravely.

"I'll give you a variant on the warning she's already given you, no doubt," the Prince went on, as if this were nothing more than a polite conversation. "A delicate balance maintains us all bound to each other: the workers in the factories, the mer-



chants in their skiffs, the alchemists at their machines, the Emperor on his throne. You—upset this, Gao Tieguai."

"Because I fit nowhere?"

The Prince made a quick, dismissive gesture with his hands. "Everyone in White Horse is as you once were," he said, bending toward Gao Tieguai, as if imparting a particular secret between equals. "Dreamers. Troublemakers. Rebels who flee Earth, finding no other choice but to leave the world behind. So long as you bend your mind to transcending, you'll not upset anything. So long as your voyage is without return. Do you understand, Gao?"

"You are mistaken," Gao said. His face had not moved. "If I truly wanted to cause unrest, I could not have returned."

"I know what you told her," the Prince said. "About desire and care. I don't believe it."

"Whether you believe it or not will change nothing to what is." Gao spread his hands. "Consider dandelion seeds, Your Excellency. They go where the wind blows them, take root where the Earth welcomes them. If they flower in the cracks of some high mountain, it's not because they chose to ascend the mountain, or because they love heights."

The Prince pondered this for a while. Gao did not move; and Shinxie could feel his presence, the humors he radiated, like a weight on the palms of her hands—calm and balanced, so unlike the Prince's fierce, stormy aura.

Finally the Prince said, "Chance? I find it too convenient that you, of all people, should return."

"As you said—" Gao shook his head—"many people like me came to White Horse. You try to read too much into events."

The reproach was almost palpable, to a man whom only the Emperor or the Grand Secretary were in a position to correct. Surely the Prince would not tolerate it? But he merely shook his head, as if amused. "I see. If that is the way the game must be played, it would be inappropriate of me to refuse. Thank you for your answers, Venerable. I trust we will speak again."

Gao inclined his head; but it was Shinxie's gaze that he met when he looked up again. His presence was in his eyes, in the light the faceted covers caught and broke into a thousand sparkles. On impulse, Shinxie reached out to touch him—and stopped herself just before she breached his privacy.

Gao made a slow, graceful gesture, inviting her to go on. "There is no shame in this," he said.

His second-skin was metal-cold, as if remembering the frosty touch of Heaven—but then her implants connected, and all she could feel was the maelstrom of humors within him: fire and earth and water and metal and wood, generating each other, extinguishing each other in an endless dance, everything in perfect balance, no one humor dominating the others, no one feeling distinguishing itself from the endless cycle. He cared for nothing; loved nothing and no one; and even his courtesies toward her or the Prince were nothing more than bare civilities, doled out on a whim.

"I see," she whispered, standing on the edge of the abyss—feeling the wind howling in her ears, the cold that traveled up into her belly. "Thank you."

Back in the Corridor of Stone, the Prince turned to Shinxie, who had not said a word. "So?" he asked.

"Are you asking for my opinion?" Shinxie said.

The Prince made a quick, annoyed gesture with his right hand. "Who else would I ask?"

"When I touched him—" Shinxie shivered—"I knew that he was right. He's brought all five humors into perfect balance; he is one with the world. He feels nothing." Nothing stuck out from the morass within him; nothing ever would. Her first

instinct when she had seen him had been correct: there was no descent. The Transcendents, their bodies changed by the alchemists, their minds shaped by the teachers and their hours of meditation, were everything they had been molded into: beings who no longer had their place on Earth, who no longer belonged in the cycle of life and death and rebirth.

The Prince walked ahead of her, in perfect control of protocol. He did not look back. "I don't believe that," he said.

He didn't trust her, then—but he had made it clear what he thought of White Horse. "Even if you didn't," Shinxie said, wearily, "what does it change? He only indulges us by staying here."

"Exactly," the Prince said. "If he is innocent, then we have no right to take his life. But, if he turns out to be a danger to the Emperor's mandate . . . then we'll take what opportunity we can to strike at him."

Shinxie nodded—it made sense, although he was wrong about Gao. But, clearly, she would not dispel his worries on her own.

"What you told him about White Horse . . ." she said, slowly, carefully.

The Prince made a quick, stabbing gesture with his hands, in a swish of silk. "Don't be a fool, Yue. What I told him clearly doesn't apply to you."

Didn't it? Wasn't she, too, a dreamer, a troublemaker? Not all troubles were political, and the prolonged affair of a minor official with an Imperial Prince had disrupted enough of the Court's protocol. And who but a dreamer would remain for so long in exile?

The Prince, though he was insensitive to humors, must have felt her hesitation. "Yue," he said, turning so that his gaze met hers—his whole body softening to the pose between a man and his concubine. "Every place must have its hierarchy of officials in charge—someone to wield the authority of the Court. And to impose order on chaos requires higher discipline than living in the midst of order. You're no troublemaker."

Just a jailer for a jail, Shinxie thought—and, suddenly, she wasn't sure she'd be able to contain her bitterness. To see him there—unchanged, radiating his usual, careless ease, the silk robes as out of place in the monastery as a scholar in the fields—bothered her more than she'd thought it would.

"No," she said, finally. "I'm no troublemaker."

That night, Shinxie could not sleep. Confused memories of the Imperial Court mingled in her mind with the monastery—the quiet of the meditation hour mingling with the gongs announcing the Tianshu Emperor's arrival, and the hum of the alchemists' machines becoming deeper and stronger, a memory from the huge contraptions at Pavilion of Going to War, hammering men into the elite of the army, with the ring of metal on metal, and the hiss of fire meeting water, and the thud-thud of metal striking earth . . .

She sat up with a start, an uneasy feeling of loss clenching her chest like a fist of ice. There was nothing around her but silence.

She got up, and stared for a while at the four chests that held her clothes—a vanity from her court days that she'd kept even here, at White Horse, where the only dress was white robes for alchemists, brown for teachers, and grey for students. Then she laid the palm of her hand on the Autumn chest, and pulled out a robe of silk embroidered with three-clawed dragons, watching it flow in her hands like sunlit water.

The Prince had seen her in this, once—with ceruse whitening her face, and her lined eyebrows joining in the shape of a moth. In another lifetime, he had asked for her in his chambers, and bent toward her as he served her tea, his lips wide and inviting in the shadows. He had—

Slowly, she folded the robe back inside the chest, and went for a walk.

In the Hall of Cultivating the Body and Mind, the students all sat in meditation,

cross-legged on the ledge that ran along the walls. Their eyes in the darkness were wide open, the facets catching and reflecting moonlight—their faces slack and smooth, though she could still feel the faint threads of emotion radiating from them, as if they were all sleeping. Dreaming.

Dreamers. Troublemakers. Was that all White Horse was to the Flowering Empire: a regulator, an escape valve—a place where the alchemists would take those who had erred, who could still err, and mold them into people who could no longer care enough to be a threat? And—if she searched her heart and mind long enough, would she remember that, when she sent them upward into Penlai Station, she saw them as already dead?

"You look troubled," a voice said behind her.

Her heart leapt, painfully, into her throat. She turned; but even before she did, she knew whom she would see.

Gao stood where, a moment before, there had been only emptiness. She couldn't see the singularity that had brought him here; but, of course, they closed quickly. "Aren't you supposed to be in your holding cell?" Shinxie asked, but the heart wasn't in it.

Gao bowed his head, gravely. "And aren't you supposed to be in bed?"

"My own business," she said. She should have been irked, but his presence—his utter lack of salient emotions—was potent, a balm to her troubled spirits. "Just as being troubled is my own business."

"Remorse," Gao said, thoughtfully. His eyes seemed reflections of the students', blank and unmoving and utterly unreadable. "Regret. Lust."

Of course, he too could read humors.

"Not lust," Shinxie said, with a quick shake of her head. She should have told him—something else. To go back to his cell, perhaps? But, when no locked door would hold him, did that rigmarole still have any sense?

"No," Gao said. "Not lust. Love. Perhaps it's worse."

"There are those," Shinxie said, stiffly, "who'll tell you that love holds up the world."

"The followers of the Crucified Man?" Gao's hands moved, slightly. "Perhaps, in some other world, that is an inalterable truth—perhaps love does keep Earth under Heaven and the world on its axis. But consider—" He paused for a moment—not because he hesitated, Shinxie suspected, but solely for effect. "You long for this man, even now, even after so many years. You humiliate yourself for him. You would die for him. Perhaps, given enough time, you might even kill for him."

"That's nonsense," Shinxie said, abruptly. "I wouldn't do anything for him."

"Really? If he told you, tomorrow, that you could come back as his concubine, what would you do?"

She thought about it for a while. There was something about him that compelled honesty—or perhaps it was merely that she was tired of lies, hidden beneath the thin coat of makeup that was protocol. "I don't know," she said.

"That's what's wrong," Gao said. "By your love, you set him apart from other men."

"Do you believe that nonsense, then, that all men are equal?" Shinxie asked.

"All men are," Gao's lips stretched into what might have been a smile. "All men are born of a woman's womb: the Emperor, the laborers; even the foreigners. They do not choose the circumstances of their birth; but, sometimes, they may alter the course of their lives. And, of course, we die, all of us, at a time that is seldom of our own choosing."

Shinxie shivered. "I did not come here to listen to philosophy."

"As you wish," Gao said. "I merely wished to point out some facts to you."

"Wished?" Shinxie said. "You have none of those, I'd have thought."

"No," Gao said, finally.

"Why are you here?" Shinxie asked, again. "Surely not for the pleasure of talking about my private life, Gao. Surely not for angering the Sixth Prince."

"I know the Sixth Prince," Gao said. "I know what he will do, and that is of little interest to me."

"I thought knowing everything was wrong."

"Some things you can know," Gao said.

She looked at him; at the expressionless face, the aura that was perfectly in balance. "Why are you here?"

"You know," Gao said, gravely.

She had heard his explanation about the dandelions—about going where the wind would carry them, flowering where the earth would have them. "No," she said. "If you came by whim, why aren't you leaving?"

"I might," Gao said. "Who knows what I will do tomorrow?"

"There is something, isn't there?" she asked. But, looking into the glint of his facets, feeling the perfect, oppressing balance of his elements, she knew that she was wrong, that the Prince was wrong: there was nothing more to him than this. He was the clouds, he was the storm: here one day, gone the next. He cared not about what he brought with him, or about what the Prince would do.

Oh, Celestials, she thought. What have we wrought here, in White Horse?

The Sixth Prince came into Shinxie's office two days later, looking pleased with himself—like a tiger who has just successfully stalked a man. He settled himself near the door, waiting for her to finish reading *Fai Meilin*—an unnerving presence at the edge of her field of vision.

*Fai Meilin's* aura was more subdued than usual, with none of the water that usually dominated her thoughts. She submitted herself meekly to Shinxie's examination, uncaring of the presence of a man in the room; and bowed to Shinxie when she was finished.

"Soon," Shinxie said. "One or two weeks, I'd think, if you keep this up."

*Fai Meilin* nodded, distantly—she had already reached the stage where it didn't truly matter anymore.

When she was gone, the Prince detached himself from the wall. "Come with me, Yue." He sounded almost eager, his aura roiling with fire. "I've found a way."

"A way?" Shinxie asked.

"A way to solve our problems," the Prince said, with a stab of his hands. "A way to beat him on his own ground."

"Gao Tiegua?" Shinxie said. "Your Excellency, I humbly submit you are mistaken. I spoke with him two days ago—" she stopped then, but the Prince didn't question her further—"and I don't think he would do anything to harm the Flowering Empire." He wouldn't do anything, just drift through the monastery until he left—staring at students or at buildings with no real interest, as if knowing already how unreal all of this was, all bound to crumble.

The Prince's aura roiled more strongly, fire taking true precedence over the other four elements. But then he seemed to remember who he was talking to, and—for a bare moment—remorse and affection filled his eyes. Shinxie's heart tightened.

"Yue," he said. Unexpectedly, he stopped, facing her equal to equal—her eyes tingled with unexpected tears. "He may well be. I trust you, but I have to be sure. I can't face His Imperial Majesty without being sure. This goes higher than what's between us."

"I see," Shinxie said, slowly.

"You do?" the Prince looked at her for a while. "Don't worry. It will soon be over—and then we'll see. Perhaps you don't need to be at White Horse anymore. There are far better places in your future. In our futures."

*If he told you, tomorrow, that you could come back as his concubine, what would you do?*

He took her, not to the Hall of Cultivating the Body and Mind, but to the World of

the Celestials, one of the smallest courtyards in the monastery. On the short flight of stairs that led up to the Memorial Pavilion, Gao stood waiting for them, surrounded by a handful of Imperial soldiers.

Other soldiers were moving toward them, escorting two prisoners, their shoulders weighed under the metal frame of a cangue.

Shinxie looked from the prisoners to the Prince—and to Gao, whose face still had not changed.

The Prince said to Gao, when they reached the dais. "You'll know who they are."

The prisoners—a young man and middle-aged woman, their faces thin, emaciated—were forced to kneel. Their cangues were removed; they kept their gazes to the ground, not daring to look up at the Prince.

"Enlighten me," Gao said. He had not moved.

"Gao Yuhuan, Gao Jiajin," the Prince said. His voice, too, was low and even. "Your wife and son."

The woman started, and her aura roiled with the agitation of water—but when she made to move, one of the guards hit her in the back with the butt of his weapon, sending her sprawling to the ground.

"I see," Gao said. He might as well have been talking about the weather. "It has been a long time, Your Excellency."

The woman, Shinxie saw, was weeping; and her son held himself rigid. Both auras were shot through with metal—the element of anguish.

The soldiers moved into position, stretching the prisoners flat on the ground. Two of them hefted bamboo canes, looking thoughtfully at the bodies before them.

Shinxie had seen many such scenes, when she was a court official; it was common to be beaten. But, nevertheless, she couldn't help the shudder that ran through her.

"You will read him," the Prince said to Shinxie. His face was a mask, his own aura dominated by fire—but, when she brushed him on her way to Gao Tieguai, she felt the other element: metal, anguish, and disgust. He was doing his duty, and not caring much for it.

Gao Tieguai extended his hand to her; she'd expected a little shrug, a little sign that he was also finding this distasteful, but there was nothing. "Gao," she said, but found all words had gone.

"Begin," the Prince said.

The canes rose, fell. The first blow tore the clothes from collar to hem; the second drew beads of blood; and each subsequent one widened the wounds even further. Shinxie could see the bodies arch against the pain—could feel the anguish and pain of metal in the auras, roiling stronger and stronger—could hear the woman's quiet sobs, slowly rising into raw screams—could see the son's body, shuddering every time the blows came. And still it didn't stop—blood was flowing over the beaten earth of the courtyard, watering the earth, and neither of them could hide their suffering any more, neither of them could bear it any more. . . .

Her hand tightened around Gao's, strongly enough to crush the fingers of a mere man.

"Again," the Prince said, his voice flat.

The soldiers nodded—and it went on, the even rise and fall of the canes, the little snap as the thin bamboo bent to strike the skin, the blows coming one after the other, the sheer repetition of it all. . . .

And, throughout, Gao's aura never wavered, never tilted out of balance—all five elements, no anguish, no anger, no pain. Nothing. The canes rose and fell and the blood splashed, and once there was a crunch like bones breaking, and the son finally cried out, his leg sticking out at an awkward angle from his hip, his flesh glistening in the morning sun, and the canes rose and fell and there was only blood and pain and a smell like charnel-houses, and still Gao said nothing, moved nothing, felt nothing.

At last, at long last, it stopped, and Shinxie drew in a shuddering breath, half-ex-

pecting the Prince to raise his hand again. But he didn't. He merely looked at her holding Gao's hand, as if she had the answers to everything.

The woman, lying in the stickiness of her own blood, tried to pull herself upward, fell back with a cry. She was whispering something, over and over; and it was a while before Shinxie realized that it was Gao's personal name, only used by his intimates.

Gao looked at the woman, uninterested; his aura did not waver.

Shinxie shook her head at the Prince, willing this farce to be over.

"I see," the Prince said. He looked at the two pitiful, broken bodies below him. "I humbly apologize, in the name of the Tianshu Emperor, for this ill-treatment. The imperial alchemists here will see about your wounds. Come, Yue."

She followed, Gao's hand still in hers—cool, reassuring, unwavering.

As they walked out of the courtyard, the woman cried out, "Husband!" Her voice was a sob.

Gao turned, bowing to her—dragging Shinxie with him. "Guilin," he said, speaking her personal name.

"Lisai," the woman whispered. "Please . . ."

Gao shook his head, very gently. "It was a long time ago, Guilin. I am deeply sorry. You'll recover, and have a long, prosperous life." He glanced at the Sixth Prince, and added, "They'll make sure you lack for nothing."

But his aura was undisturbed, his second-skin cool under Shinxie's touch. He meant none of it.

Later, the Prince came to her office, looking small and wan. "I'll be going back to the capital, Yue. I'll report that there's nothing to see here, nothing to threaten the Flowering Empire. My work is done."

"I see," Shinxie said. She still heard the sounds of the canes rising and falling—still smelt the sharp, animal tang of blood in the morning—and felt Gao's aura, utterly unperturbed. A dandelion, going where the wind blew; a cloud, a storm. There was nothing more to him; not anymore—and she was the one who had shaped him, who had made hundreds like him.

The Prince's face was pale, and even his formal makeup couldn't quite disguise it. "I shouldn't have done it, should I?" he asked.

Something twisted within her. "You had to protect the Empire," she said. "You had to make sure."

The Prince's hands clenched, slightly. "The alchemists will repair the skin, and mend the broken bones. It will be as if it had never happened. I'll make sure they're compensated—that they're pardoned, with enough money to establish themselves. It will be as if it had never happened." His tone was that of one who didn't believe in what he said; and for the first time since she'd known him, his voice shook and broke.

Shinxie fought the crushing feeling that threatened to overwhelm her chest. "Go home," she said, gently. "You have wives and children. You have no reason to cling to any of this."

"Yue—" the Prince said, and stopped. "If I were to—" He stopped again, as if words would no longer come to him. "Come back with me," he said. "Please."

He had never asked. He had never begged. In all the days of their liaisons, even in the days since he'd come back into her life. . . .

Oh, Your Excellency. . . .

*If he told you, tomorrow, that you could come back as his concubine, what would you do?*

She hadn't been able to answer Gao, then. But now, in the quiet of her office, there was only one thing she could say, one answer that would make sense. "My place is here. My work is here. I am sorry. Go home. Forget about this place." Forget about me.

The Prince's face contracted, very slightly. Shinxie reached out, feeling nothing but

a shadow of her old desire—stroked his hand, gently. "May you live long, and attain all five blessings, Your Excellency."

And, in that instant—looking at this small, hunched man who was no less broken than the prisoners he'd chosen to beat—she knew.

Gao was waiting for her in the Hall of Cultivating the Body and Mind—standing in the center, amid the students deep in their meditations. He bowed to her when she arrived.

It was the hour after dusk; the drum had been beaten, signaling the end of this day's teaching. The teachers had gone back to their rooms; the alchemists to their laboratories. The procession that accompanied the Sixth Prince was making its slow way down the mountain, taking with it Gao's wife and son in palanquins—pale and shrunk, their bodies repaired by the alchemists' painstaking work.

"I know how you came back," Shinxie said.

Gao's face turned toward her, the eye-facets gleaming with the first star. He said nothing.

"Balance," Shinxie whispered. "You can't open a singularity unless you care about nothing—but that's not how it works, is it?" That wasn't how . . . She took a deep, trembling breath, feeling the icy air go down, all the way into her lungs. Finally she said. "If you loved everything on this earth—the mountains and the valleys, the storms and the sunlight—the Emperor, the merchants and the laborers, the alchemists and the workers . . ." If nothing truly stood out, if everything was in balance . . .

Gao said, finally, "Then, if you've listened to what I told you, you'd know that wouldn't be love anymore."

No, not in the sense of desire or lust—it wouldn't set people apart, wouldn't tear away at the fabric of the world. . . .

He did not move—and she was half-relieved, half-disappointed. Would he not even attempt to silence her?

"You needn't have come back here," she whispered, and then something came loose within her, some pent-up anger or frustration. "You needn't come back here and go through this pretense—there was no need—" Not for the Sixth Prince, not for the canes, not for the memory of blood clogging up her nostrils, the nausea that threatened to overwhelm her every time she paused. . . .

"This is White Horse," Gao said, gravely. "A refuge for the Flowering Empire's dreamers; the only place where they can thrive. If you cannot grasp what this is about, then who will?" He tilted his head—and, with a growing, convulsive shiver, she remembered the conversation they'd had in the Hall, the students in meditation, his words about love and equality, nesting at the back of their minds like coiled snakes. . . .

New teachings. He had come back because of the students, because of what he thought he could give them. Because he meant to change them.

"You—" she whispered.

"There is so much blindness in this world," Gao said, and for the first time, she heard kindness in his voice. It did nothing to quell the tremors that ran up her arms. "So much misery to extinguish."

"And you'd change us?" she whispered. "To fit your rules? What gave you the right—?"

She swung her hand, clumsily, toward him; he caught it in his own, imprisoning the fingers in an unbreakable hold.

"Shinxie," he whispered, and in his voice was an echo of the Prince's need, of his aching tenderness. "The Tianshu Emperor shapes us to his needs. Do you think it's a better rule?"

The Imperial edict, sending her into her exile; White Horse, the gateway to a voyage of no return; the casual arrogance of the Sixth Prince, the faith that the Empire should be safeguarded, at all costs. "I don't know what your rule would be," she said.



"You know how I came back," Gao said. His aura washed over her, unchanging—all five elements, entwined into perfect balance; fire and wood, earth and water and metal generating each other, destroying each other, supporting each other in their endless cycle. "That's all I can offer you."

"I could call him back," Shinxie said. "The Prince. Tell him what happened, tell him what you did."

Gao said nothing. "If that is your wish, I will not gainsay it."

"You wouldn't?" She couldn't keep the bitterness out of her voice. "You let your wife and son be beaten rather than reveal anything, and you wouldn't stop me?"

"My wife and son were never in real danger," Gao said. "Many things are wrong in the Flowering Empire, but the death of two innocents is not yet condoned. But to stop you would require violence," Gao said. "Perhaps even killing you."

Shinxie laughed. She couldn't help herself—the sounds racked her, bitter sobs with nothing of joy. "You—"

He was still watching her, his head bent at an angle, like a curious bird; and suddenly she realized that everything he had ever said or done had led to this point—that every one of his acts had aimed to let her know, to put her in the position when she knew exactly what he felt—as if he still needed some kind of judgment passed on him, some reassurance that he was right.

No, that was not it.

He had come here, in White Horse, for a change that would start among the Flowering Empire's dreamers—among her students. A change she would witness; for she was Abbess of White Horse.

Of course he would want her to understand.

"Celestials take you," she whispered.

Gao's lips thinned into a smile. "You'll find that's impossible."

"I could stop you," Shinxie said—but she thought of the Prince's haunted face, and knew she couldn't. "But it wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be fair."

Gao inclined his head, and said nothing. His aura washed over her, with the regularity of waves on a calm morning—something she could cling to, even now.

"The others," she said. "On Penlai Station. Will they come back?"

"Who knows? I can't speak for them."

Gao made a slow, sweeping gesture with his hands; and the air started to sparkle around him. Slowly, the singularity came into being, blurring the edges of his being—layer after layer of his body slowly erasing itself from reality. "Goodbye, Yue Shinxie. I trust we will meet again."

After he was gone, she stood for a while, the silence of the Hall washing over her—the familiar sounds of nightingales singing, the crisp, biting air of the night on her fingers, the lights reflected in the facets of her students' eyes.

She wondered how he would fare, out in the Flowering Empire—what else he would do.

Whatever the case, things would never be the same.

She wanted to laugh, or to weep, but even that seemed to be beyond her. Instead, she felt a slow, inexpressible feeling rise up in her: a desperate wish for the world to thrive, no matter what happened; for the Emperor, the merchants and the laborers, the alchemists and the workers to live and prosper and understand what was right—Gao's love for everything, strong enough to crush the bones of her chest.

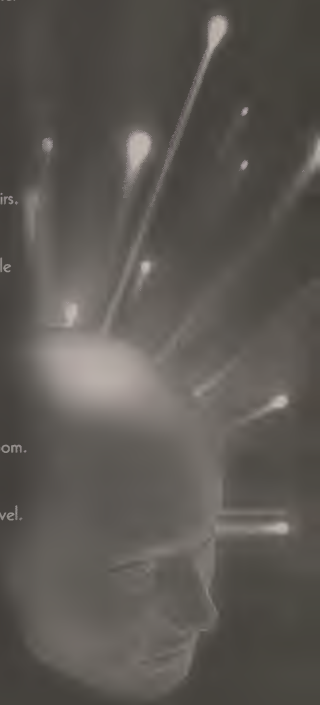
And, standing shivering in the courtyard, she finally understood the gift he had left her.

The path to transcendence had shifted, away from the dry detachment of Penlai Station and the emptiness of Heaven: it now lay in the shadow of his footsteps, in the singularity that compassion had opened—wide and clear and ready to be followed. ○

# SUBATOMIC REDEMPTION

I, too, was bored senseless  
when my high school biology teacher  
described in neat chalk-rings  
the orbits of electrons  
around the nucleus, clean  
fields of addition and subtraction,  
which all of us could sense  
had nothing to do  
with the real world. Years passed.  
More doubt, more body hair,  
more black holes and botched affairs.  
In time, truth wormed its way  
into the apple of any brain.  
Truth—electrons bounce and jangle  
at the speed of light,  
so erratic, so unhinged that  
sometimes, literally,  
they disappear from the universe,  
fly off to god knows where  
then return like nothing happened,  
blushing like party guests  
back from making out in the bathroom.  
We should have known better  
than to fear being laid  
beneath the business end of a shovel.  
Wherever we are going,  
we have gone there before  
and broke free using nothing more  
than the paltry speed of stars.

—Michael Meyerhofer



# THE ICE LINE

Stephen Baxter

**Stephen Baxter's new novel, *Ark*, a sequel to *Flood*, will be out from Ace later this year. The author is currently working on his "Northland" alternate-prehistory series of novels, which has locations close to where he lives, in north England—as does "Ice Line," where, he tells us, "Admiral Collingwood is a local hero!"**

**Author's Note:** This story takes place some eighty-five years after the events of "The Ice War" (*Asimov's*, September 2008), and is similarly loosely related to my 1993 novel *Anti-Ice*. In our timeline Admiral Collingwood did fight beside Nelson at Trafalgar, and Robert Fulton's *Nautilus* was built and trialed, though never used in war.

## Prologue

*I discovered the attached manuscript on January 1st 1806, a dismal New Year, when with my father's staff I was sifting through the charred wreckage of the Ulgham manufactory. It was scribbled on odd bits of paper that themselves tell something of the author's extraordinary story—a torn blueprint of the old Nautilus submersible machine, a warship's victualling sheet still reeking of gunpowder, even a memorandum in my own hand, all rolled up and stuffed into a spent Congreve rocket shell, presumably in the very last moments before the Tom Paine rose for its momentous journey to the Phoebean nest and the ice line. Though I did not immediately recognize his hand, it was immediately clear to me who was the author.*

*The whole world now knows the biographies of two of the heroes of the Tom Paine—Miss Caroline Herschel, and my own father Rear Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood—but the third member of that famous crew, Ben Hobbes, has received less attention. His own account shows how he had to overcome, not merely lethal peril, but the flaws of his own heart. And in this mortal realm none of us faces a greater challenge.*

*I herewith present Ben Hobbes—his journal. The first entry is dated Thursday, December 12th, 1805.*

—ANNE COLLINGWOOD, Morpeth, June 22nd, 1809.

## I

**T**he drummers sounded battle stations, and it was a noise fit to chill the blood.

It was a bleak sky that hung over the *Indomitable*, and the other square-riggers and gun-boats of the French and Spanish navies that crowded to defend Napoleon's National Flotilla as it toiled across the Channel, on its way to give England her worst night since the comet-fall of 1720. It was already late afternoon, so long had it

taken the Flotilla to form up out of Boulogne, and I mused that the elements were showing little sympathy for the hundred and seventy thousand troops throwing up their guts in the invasion barges.

And, peering out from the foredeck, I saw the British ships bearing down. There are few things in the world so elegant as a fighting three-master seen head on as she leans into the wind, her canvas full set. But some of those ships were already showing the sparking of guns, and you could hear a distant pop, pop. The Royal Navy had taken a licking at Trafalgar, and one-arm Nelson was swimming with the fishes, but the English weren't defeated yet.

All around me the *Indomitable* prepared for war. You must not believe glamorous accounts of a tar's life. That French warship, already battered and patched from previous scraps, was crowded with men, you went shoulder to shoulder with your fellows on the working decks, and now all of them were running around and hauling on ropes and clambering high in the rigging. The shot racks were opened, the powder hatches made fast, the cutlasses and pistols handed out, and huge canvases soaked in seawater were draped in the deck spaces as firebreaks. The most ominous preparation was the swabbing of the decks and the scattering of sand, so that men would not slip on their mates' blood. The cabin lads penned the ducks and geese in their coops, and dragged the goats and pigs to the side and dropped them in the surging water between the ships, the first casualties of the day. And the wives and whores cowered in the corners.

As for me, Ben Hobbes, I had signed the papers and taken Bonaparte's gold to sail my *Nautilus* against the English. That slim copper hull was already hung from its hawser by the starboard rail. But I had no intention of adding my name to the butcher's bill that day. I looked for Lieutenant Gourdon, the brute Frenchman who had been assigned by the Captain to supervise me and who, damn his eyes, had been as efficient at his task as he had been reluctant to take it on. In those frantic minutes he was distracted by his other duties, and so I took my chance and darted away below deck, seeking a place to be out of sight.

Below, the atmosphere was no less fraught. I hurried past the surgeon's cabin where the tables were being scrubbed down, and the doctor himself in his leather apron lined up the blades and saws and scalpels and tourniquets. I found myself in the first gun deck—the uppermost of three on this first rate, as the British would have called the ship. Here in this wide, low space, you had teams of a dozen men gathering around each of the weapons on the starboard side—for you only fired from one side at a time—and they rushed through the complicated choreography of preparing a big gun: raising the port, ramming a powder cartridge down the barrel and then the ball, before you heave your muzzle out of the port and make the tackles for the recoil, and the gun captain takes his quill filled with powder and drops it into the touch-hole. The powder boys scuttled with their lethal supplies, and the lieutenants stalked about yelling orders, and I hurried through the space, meeting the eye of no man or boy.

But then Gourdon showed up, damn him, and I knew he had watched me more closely than I thought, and followed me down. "There you are, you Yankee worm!" Gourdon roared this in my face, showing teeth gapped after a boyhood of brawling in the Marseilles docks, and his long pigtail was greasy and clumped with bits of stale food, for he used it to wipe his mouth when he ate. You can speak for or against the Revolution in France and what "Emperor" Napoleon has done with it, but you'd not have found a man like Pierre Gourdon in any position of responsibility in the navy of King Louis. "You took good French money to sail yon undersea ship against the British—serving the nation that has invaded your own—and now at the crux you skulk like a rat among these guns. You are a coward and a thief!"

I was stung by one insult, but not the other. "Coward you may call me; but what man wants to die for a cause that isn't his own? But thief—never! I took your gov-

ernment's money, for I had little choice, once my master Robert Fulton had absconded to the English—and your officers were done press-ganging me! Look, Gourdon—why not just let me be? The *Nautilus*'s pinprick attack will make no difference to the outcome of this mighty conflict. Your own Emperor said so, at first, when Fulton presented a prototype of his invention. When the action's done we'll see to a reckoning." I winked at him. "I have gold, lodged in a bank in Paris."

A persuasive argument you might think, but he grabbed my collar and began to lug me off that deck. "For you the reckoning is now, Yankee—"

You can hear a cannonball before it arrives, a kind of hot descending whistle.

A whole section of the starboard side exploded inwards, sending one gun swiveling from its mount and skittling its crew, and there was a hail of stout French oak smashed to splinters, lethal in themselves. I saw the projectile itself—they don't always move so fast, but the mass they pack does the damage—and it passed out of the port side hull, making an even bigger mess of the woodwork. My ears rang from the concussion, and I stepped back. I trod on a power boy, lying on the floor, his head stove in and his right leg detached and lying neatly beside him.

And through the gaping wound in that starboard bulkhead I saw another ship's hull slide close, a "Nelson chequer" of paintwork and gaping gun nozzles, surely only a few dozen yards away. Beyond I saw more ships closing with stately grace—and, under that grey Channel sky, I saw something vaster than any ship, breaking the water and rising, a sleek dome from which the water poured. I thought perhaps it was a whale, but it lacked flukes and a spout and a gimlet eye. Strangest of all, I thought I saw a man riding the back of the thing as it rose, attached by a sort of harness and a metal wand. Then smoke from the cannonades drifted across my field of view, and I saw no more. Just moments after the shot, my senses were fuddled. I think if I had known that that brief impression was my first glimpse of a Phoebean—an invader far worse than any Frenchman who ever lived—I would have subsided into a greater fear yet!

The gun crews were responding now. Men hauled away their fallen mates, or the bits of them, the officers yelled and the crew leaders roared their orders, and the mighty cannons leapt back under the recoil, and the space was filled with heat and smoke and a stink of gunpowder. Still Gourdon wasn't about to let me go. His meaty hand clamped to my shoulder, he dragged me away.

## II

**M**y *Nautilus* still hung from its crane, like a trophy fish on display.

I clambered up a short ladder to the port in its upper hull. Soon I was sitting in my solitary couch and strapping the leather harness in place pulling a blanket over my legs. Glancing around the hull, I saw that it had been loaded with bombs—copper canisters of air—and with carcasses, Fulton's dragged mines. *Nautilus* was sturdy enough around me, with her copper sheets riveted over iron ribs—and she was mine, the design as much my own as Fulton's no matter what the popular accounts may tell you, and she had been tested and not found wanting. But whether she could withstand a cannon shot was a matter I didn't want to explore.

Gourdon loomed over me, blocking out the grey sky. "The English lie to the north," he grunted. "The square-riggers will not be able to lower their guns to fire on you, though the gun-boats might—"

"I know what to do. Shut up the dome, Gourdon, and let me be on the way."

He leaned forward, so his brutal face filled my world. "Be sure that if you flee today, no matter where you hide, I will find you."

But I grinned at him; whatever followed, at least I would be out of reach of his fists and the odor of his breath.

He and a seaman hauled up the glass blister and set it over my head and shoulders. Soon they were tightening the screws with a will, and the noise of battle was shut out. Then Gourdon waved and yelled, and seamen hauled on ropes, and I was lifted up in the air, and the hawser swiveled to dangle me over the sea.

Just for a minute, looking out of my blister, I was granted a view of the battle vouchsafed to none other, aside from those wretches climbed high in their ships' rigging. In a fight between sailing ships, the great square-riggers close as slow and subtle as dreams. If there are formations and grand designs of admirals, it's not visible to your basic seaman. But when the ships close on one another their walls of guns fire their iron spite at each other, and there's a kind of friction of explosions that erupts all along the facing hulls. That day the destiny of England herself was in play and the fight was fierce, and I could see that some ships of both flags had already been reduced to drifting hulks with splintered stumps of masts and shattered hulls, and the crews were pitching the dead and dying over the side, and yet they fought on.

So much you might have seen in any naval action around the world for a century, as England and France, and Spain and Holland too, had slugged it out in search of empire and wealth. But today you had the added element of the National Flotilla: the huge, unlikely fleet Napoleon the Ogre had gathered in Boulogne, where the harbors had been crammed with boats gunwale to gunwale. The rumors had been that Napoleon had assembled seven army corps, with no fewer than nine thousand horses, and blacksmiths, surgeons, carpenters, grooms, harness makers, and chefs, and all the weapons, ammunition, and supplies they would need to make their foothold in England, all packed into three thousand boats. The Royal Navy had been England's best hope of defense, and for years it had kept the French and Spanish fleets bottled up in their ports. But in October the navy had been dished by Nelson's huge failure at Trafalgar—and Napoleon had sailed as soon as he could, despite the challenge of the December weather.

Now, in the gaps between the square-riggers, I saw the Flotilla boats like a dismal carpet on the water, barges and bilge keelers and other flat-bottomed types, ideal for landing on southern England's shallow beaches yet wallowing in the choppy waters of the Channel. In amongst them were the prames, specialist gunships, three-masted and a hundred feet long, but with a shallow draught and a shallow triple keel, and smaller fighting ships like chaloupes and cannoniers and peniches. And I saw how the English gun-boats, heftily rowed by seventy men apiece, prowled among the wretched lumbering barges, smashing them to pieces. Many blue-coats would die before they ever got off this sea—and yet more would come through this trial of water and fire to land, and thus do tyrants pay for their ambitions with the lives of others.

All this I saw in an instant, suspended by the hawser. But then the French sailors paid out their ropes, and there was a sickening moment of falling—and I was in the water with the rest!

### III

**T**he first order of business was to get under the sea, rather than bob about on it. I pulled a lever to open my keel, a hollow iron tube into which water bubbled steadily, and I imagined the stares of the men in the barges as I sank into the briny.

I was immediately enclosed in the sea's own peculiar noise, which is something like the rushing of blood you may hear if you cup your hands over your ears. Balm for the soul compared to the popping of cannons, screaming of shells, and shrieking

of men! I could still see traces of the battle, however—the invasion barges littering the water above like pages torn from a book, and here and there a stray shot plowing into the sea like a diving bird—and, more gruesomely, I saw bodies adrift in their own clouds of blood. I decided I would descend to two or three fathoms' depth—Fulton had taken the *Nautilus* to four fathoms once, and stayed there an hour, with three crewmen on board—for I judged that such a depth should shield me from the worst of the firestorm above. I would be too deep for my leather snorkel, but I had air contained in my bombs and would not suffer.

As I descended I ran a hasty check of my craft; the copper hull banged and creaked, but those iron ribs were sturdy, and there were no big leaks. I tested my rudder and my fins, the latter being two horizontal flaps fixed to the vertical rudder and intended to control the angle of dive, all adjusted with levers from the cabin. I tried out my propulsion, a screw affixed to the stern of the craft that I turned with a hand crank. All worked as I and Fulton [*Here the author had scratched out "Fulton and I"—A.C.*] had designed and built it, and I would be able to swim about the sea as graceful as a porpoise. Snug under my blanket, my *Nautilus* stout about me, my mood began to improve. I wondered now at my reluctance to climb aboard in the first place.

The scheme was that I should assail British warships. The vessel carried mines we called carcasses. I would rise up beneath an enemy, and a spike mounted on my dome would be driven into the ship's wooden hull. I would speed away, cranking the screw furiously, paying out a line. When I got far enough away the carcass would strike the hull; each carcass was a copper cylinder containing hundreds of pounds of gunpowder, to be detonated by a gunlock mechanism that fired on contact with the hull. All of this we had extensively tested in the course of dives in the Seine and elsewhere.

Yet, if you have followed my account this far, you will not be surprised to learn that I had no intention of swimming anywhere near a British vessel. I had no loyalty to either side in this war. Let Gourdon fume and rage—he had no control over me now. I decided I would make for the sanctuary of land—and heading not north to the threatened beaches of England, but south, to one of the tiny harbors and fishing villages that pepper the French coast. In the chaos of war I was sure opportunities for advancement of one sort or another would present themselves—and there was always the gold that waited for me in that bank in Paris, if I could reach it.

So I started cranking the screw, and I worked my rudders and eyed my compass (you may be surprised to know that compasses work as well beneath the water as above). I thought my future was as set as it had been for some months, ever since I had been brought into the dangerous attention of the Ogre. And yet I have found on numerous occasions in the course of my peculiar career that moments of apparent security in fact represent the greatest danger. So it proved this time!

I saw it rising up from below.

You will understand that I had my gaze fixed on what I could see of the battle above. I had no expectation of any threat from *below*, short of a few strands of kelp that might jam up my screw. And yet I now saw movement from the corner of my eye, a subtle shifting of shades, a pale mass that I thought looked like an immense bubble. Pillars worked beneath, but they may have been shafts of light, and there was another sort of light, a spark like lightning, which played about the upper surface of the system. I stopped cranking, my hands resting on my control levers, and I watched, curious. I had no sense of danger; it was a play of light and color.

But in the last instant I saw a carapace hard and pocked and scratched, as solid as I was.

It slammed into me from below, and I heard a crumple of copper and a great groan as iron ribs buckled, and water sprayed in from a dozen wounds. All this even as I



rose on the back of this great crab-thing from the deep. I cranked hard and worked my levers, my rudders flapping like birds' wings, but without avail. In moments I was lifted up into the air, and the *Nautilus* rolled, falling down the curve of that carapace, and I was suddenly in chaos, with my blanket and biscuits and other junk falling around me, and I was grateful to be strapped into my couch.

With a hard impact the *Nautilus* gained the water once more. She floated, but I was suspended upside down, and water gushed through strained seams. Dizzy, battered, I could barely think.

And then explosions came. I looked back. The rising island from which I had fallen was supported in the air on pillars that glimmered blue where they thrust out of the water. A French first rate took it on, her port guns blazing at the ice monster. As its supports shattered and broke, the great lens dipped, and I worried it might fall on me.

Then the glass of my blister smashed in. I cowered, wondering what new calamity had befallen me—but the glass had been broken, not by some natural phenomenon, but by an axe. Head and shoulders thrust through my blister, swathed in a hooded oilskin coat. I cried out in French, "Who are you?"

"I'm English for a start," came the answer in that brisk language. Then the hood was pushed back, to reveal a shock of blond hair, a sturdy yet compelling face—a woman! And a young one. "And you, I presume, are Ben Hobbes, for nobody else rides around the ocean in a mechanical fish." She smiled. "I have been looking for you. I have come to save you. And not a moment too soon, for that Phoebean is starting to look decidedly irritated." She held out a gloved hand. "Come!"

I hesitated for one heartbeat. Then I grabbed her hand.

And that was how I met Miss Anne Collingwood! [*And a true enough account given a certain narrative license.* —A.C.]

#### IV

Miss Collingwood dragged me by main force through the splintered remains of my observing blister. Though she was little older than twenty, perhaps five years younger than I, she was a woman who was stronger than she looked, and got on with the job with no squeamishness—and that first impression I had of her is as good a portrait in a few words as any I can muster.

More hands reached out of the gathering dusk, and I was hauled without much tenderness up and over the side, and dropped onto a soggy deck. The tars stood about me, in black coats and trousers on this unlit deck, but I glimpsed the blue of a Royal Navy officer's uniform at the throat of one of them, a tall chap in a tricorn hat.

I struggled to my feet and surveyed my situation. I found that my submersible had been caught by grappling irons and lashed to the hull of this boat; I think you'd call it a sloop, but I'm no expert on Royal Navy vessels. It ran dark and low in the water, a boat that didn't want to be seen. Now sailors whacked at ropes with axes, and they were cutting the *Nautilus* free. "Bosun, put her about and spread the canvas for Worthing," called the pale officer. The sails snapped at the rigging, and with a low creak the boat turned. Looking back, I glimpsed that mighty pale dome once last time, subsiding back into the Channel waters. And beyond the fighting ships glided, wreathed in gun smoke and illuminated by their own cannon fire. I was mighty relieved as the noise of battle receded.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Hobbes," the officer said dryly. "I am John Clavell—Lieutenant."

I faced him, and tried to make a good show of it, if only for the sake of the woman, but of a sudden the shock penetrated my defenses. I slumped down to sit on a barrel, feeling vaporous. "I don't suppose you can spare a blanket."

Clavell tutted at my weakness, but he handed Anne a spare cloak, which she spread over my shoulders, and Clavell dug a huntsman's hip flask from a pocket and allowed me a sip of brandy. "You will recover," Anne assured me.

Clavell was less sympathetic. "Not if you coddle the man. Not much room for that in war, Hobbes."

"Is that so? Well, thanks for the ride anyhow, Admiral, and the liqueur," I said, playing up my Yankee twang in response to his strangulated King George accent.

Miss Collingwood flared up. "Ben, Lieutenant Clavell is one of my father the Admiral's most trusted colleagues. He's risked his life to come pluck you out of the sea—"

"And passed up on my chance to do something about these damn French tonight." He gazed around at the oceanic battle scene.

"So it would pay you to show some respect, in the days and weeks to come."

Days and weeks? I stared at them, my mind racing. Needless to say I had no idea why I had been press-ganged, and not for the first time. I looked back to where that milky disc was subsiding into invisibility. I said, "I have always been suspicious of co-incidences. Tell me there's a connection between two extraordinary events: the presence of yon marine beast, and my rescue from the cold waves by a beautiful maiden and the next Nelson."

It's hard to say which of them bristled more. Anne said, "Robert Fulton said you were a faithless swindler but no fool, and I can see he's right. Yes, Ben, we need your help to deal with the Phoebeans—one specimen of which upended you, when it should, we hoped, have been taking on the French gunships."

"Phoebeans . . . [Later the author had me spell the term for him.—A.C.] Some classical allusion, no doubt."

"'Phoebean' means 'of the moon,' Hobbes," Clavell said.

"So yon beasts are from the moon?"

"No," said Anne. "Though the first savants thought so, and the name stuck. In fact the Phoebeans come from much further away—"

"And most of us heartily wish they'd go back there," said Clavell.

"England, and indeed all mankind, faces a much more serious threat than even the rampaging of the Corsican. A *second* invasion—an invasion from the sky! That's the possibility that the King's Grand Council has instructed my father to deal with—and that's why we need you."

In actuality this strange news struck me as no more bizarre than some of the wilder ideas I had heard cooked up on the fringes of Bonaparte's court. "I don't see how a man who can build a sub-oceanic boat will be of much use against a pack of sailors from beyond the air."

She smiled. "Oh, we want you to help us build a much stranger boat than even your *Nautilus*, Ben. You'll see. And I believe you'll find it an honor to serve."

Clavell inspected me closely. "But I have a feeling you aren't a man much motivated by honor, are you, Hobbes? You're like your mentor Fulton, who tried to sell his inventions to British and French, whoever would open the purse widest. And I'll say this—if Fulton hadn't got himself killed in a French raid on the London dockyards, where he was running tests of a new apparatus, we'd have left you to drown in the Channel tonight."

That was the first time I heard it confirmed that Robert Fulton was dead. He was a decent enough man, in my eyes, even if he had taken all the credit for the work of others. [I have no way of confirming the author's allegations against Robert Fulton—who in turn had often maligned Hobbes. I myself attribute such remarks to the combative relationship of two talented individuals.—A.C.] As for Clavell's barb about honor, my view is that if you have to choose between one empire of madmen and another, your only duty is to yourself and to your own.

This interval of conversation was soon over, for we were approaching our destination. The canvas was hauled in, and the boats were put in the water, and I prepared for my own first descent upon an English shore.

## V

Worthing, so I was later informed by Anne, is a popular resort in Sussex, and in the summer if you want bathing machines and polite company you'll find them there. But the tide was high that winter night, for Napoleon's admirals had chosen to land when it was so, and our boats pitched us onto a shore of shingle and sea wrack and banks of aging weed that stank like rotting flesh. As we tramped up the shingle I could see very little of the town itself, and I would learn that all along the coast of southern England that night the watchmen were dousing the lights and folk were drawing their curtains, so the country turned a blacked-out face to the invaders.

And a musket cracked, out of the dark. I pride myself I was first down on the stones.

The bosun held up a lantern and waved a navy ensign. "We are friends!" he whispered urgently. "From His Majesty's vessel the *Terrier*, on urgent King's business . . ."

Ragged-looking fellows appeared from the dark, not wearing any kind of uniform, wielding muskets that looked like farmers' fowling pieces. I could see which one had fired the shot, for he held his musket like a club; perhaps he hadn't had time to reload—or perhaps he didn't know how. After a brief negotiation, we were allowed to pass.

Clavell hauled me to my feet, without much consideration, and we walked on. "Militia men. You would know all about that, Yankee. Raised as part of the Duke of York's grand plan for the defense of England, along with fortifications around London, and defenses for the ports, and seventy-odd gun towers strung along the coasts of Sussex and Kent."

The Duke of York, as it happened, was a son of the King. I peered at the farmers' boys. "This, to fight off Napoleon?"

"They're all we've got, and a doughty lot," Clavell said, loud enough for the men to hear.

Well, I took a certain bitter satisfaction at the fear evident on the faces of these Englishmen, the first I had encountered on this shore, for I had seen such fear on the faces of my own countrymen when Napoleon's army had started its march up the Mississippi in the Year Three. The British had done damn little to help us fight him off then, and if it was now their turn, a part of me thought, serve them right.

We reached an unprepossessing marina at the head of the beach, where a group of broughams waited, black-enameled and all but invisible in the gathering dark, with the horses snuffling in their harnesses. Anne, Clavell, and I hurried to the second vehicle in the line. Within, by the light of a lantern, an older man sat waiting for us, wearing a uniform of white trousers and a richly embroidered deep blue jacket; he said nothing as we boarded, and expressed no surprise at seeing us turn up at this rendezvous, after such a perilous journey. Before I was settled, the driver's whip cracked, and the brougham wheeled about and rattled into motion—taking us, I judged, north and away from the coast.

Clavell sat by me, stiff and silent. Anne sat with the older man, and she murmured to him, "Papa." In response he patted her hand—that's all, a small gesture. People say the British are reserved, but I don't hold with that; they feel as deeply as the rest of us, but see no need to shout about it.

Well, that single word, "Papa," told me who I was dealing with. Rear Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood was in his late fifties, I learned later, yet he looked older, with

sparse grey hair pulled back from a dour face and the lines deep around an unsmiling mouth, and he sat stiffly, as if his old bones were uncomfortable even at rest. His most striking feature was a pair of blue eyes of extraordinary paleness, like windows set in his head. Yet they flickered, restless.

At first he spoke to Clavell. "Went it well, Lieutenant?"

"We made our mission, sir, as you see," said the junior. "But the Ogre is on his way, as we feared. Have you news of the landings?"

Collingwood snorted. "Well, that's a damn fool question, my lad, as I have spent the day sitting in this rattling brougham waiting for you. We should be in London by the morn, and more may be clear then." He turned those brilliant eyes on me. "And you are Hobbes. Do you understand where you are?"

"England," says I cheekily.

"At least you have a trace of spirit. The south coast of England, but we head north. The road is a good one. We'll refresh the horses at Horsham and Dorking and Kingston, but my aim is not to stop before we reach London, and we'll beat the French to it, I trow, for even Bonaparte's armies cannot move so fast as that. Do you know who I am?"

"Admiral Collingwood. But I thought Villeneuve knocked all the English admirals on the head in the Trafalgar action—including Nelson." Thus I goaded him, to a glare from Anne.

Collingwood's expression was stern. "I wasn't at Trafalgar. Indeed, I have not been to sea for some years. Not since the Phoebean activities on Mars were detected, and the Grand Council urged the government to act, and I was seconded for the project by the Minister of War . . ."

*Mars? The planet Mars?* Questions bubbled in my head, but the Admiral was not a man to be interrupted.

"Would I had been at Nelson's side in Trafalgar, or leading the line with him! I saved the man's life, you know, in the action at Cape St. Vincent in '97, but I could not save him at Trafalgar. And if I had served we might be keeping the French at bay tonight." All of which sounded arrogant of the man to me—but who am I to say he was wrong? "Damn this business of the Phoebeans! Sometimes I think it is a diversion we cannot afford—a war on a second front. And yet, if I had not been called home from the sea I would have seen even less of my beloved home—and, who knows? Perhaps Anne and her sisters would never have been born."

"Oh, Papa—"

"And if my own father had been flush enough to afford to purchase me a better career I'd not have ended up in the navy at all, what? Ifs and buts aside, here's a certainty—the Phoebeans struck once before, in '20, and they will venture beyond the ice line to strike again—unless we make a stand now. And that's what this is all about, Hobbes." I understood nothing of this. "And how goes the French war in America?"

I shrugged. "I've been away some years. You must know better than me. Napoleon has his marshals camped around Manhattan. He extracts our wealth to pay for his ventures elsewhere. Every spring a new army is raised, but if we've dislodged him yet I've not heard it."

"It's a bitter conflict, so I'm told. A case of strike and run, and no quarter given. So it must be when a war is so uneven. I was in Boston in '75, if you want to know. Yon rebels were a damn sturdy lot, I'll give them that, who ran the redcoats ragged. But the revolt was an upsetting of the sensible order of things, which I have always seen as my duty to prevent contaminating the English body politic. And what has been born of the French and their own dreams of liberty? The Corsican, that's what! I wish you Americans well, you are a sturdy young nation, but it's to be hoped you never birth a Napoleon of Boston or Rhode Island." He glanced at his daughter and at Clavell,

who looked grey with fatigue. "We really must try to sleep. Here, Clavell, there are blankets in the trunk under your seat, and flasks of water and whisky, and I think some biscuits . . ."

So we talked no more, and ate and drank a bit, and settled under our blankets as separate as bugs in their cocoons. And as we clattered through the English night, I dreamed of Collingwood's strange blue eyes, and Anne's brave prettiness, and the French fire descending on the country behind us, and I thought of the Phoebean as it rose from the sea under me—and of Mars! I wondered how all these strange elements would shape my life from hereon—if, indeed, I could stay alive.

## VI

**W**e arrived in London before the dawn, yet the city was already busy.

We went in search of orders and information to the Foreign Office, and then to Downing Street, and across Horse Guards to the Admiralty, and then through St. James's to Piccadilly. Having seen no city grander than Baltimore, I found my head quite turned around as we ran about that mausoleum of smoke and marble. All these offices of government and the military were as busy as you would expect, with runners dashing to and fro with messages, and Collingwood himself was called into Downing Street to speak to Pitt, the Prime Minister. I got a great sense of urgency, of a hub of empire thrown into crisis. But it was alarming to see carriages and broughams being loaded up with boxes of papers and elderly ministers, evidently in preparation for flight.

And yet away from the great temples of government, as the city woke, it must, I sensed, have felt like any other morning—the carts and drays rumbling over the cobbles, the news men and milk men yelling their wares, the water wagons spraying the streets to keep the dust down—even though Bonaparte was already charging up from the coast, and by nightfall none of this might be the same.

At last we reached Albemarle Street, where, Collingwood's main home being in a northern town, he kept a house that had been bequeathed him by Nelson himself. Little was made of it while I was there, but in the days that followed, detail by detail, I deduced something of the relationship of the two famous sailors—Collingwood the senior by ten years, grave and competent, physically stronger and less prone to illness and heat, and Nelson the vain one, the glorious and imaginative one, who had had to be saved by his brother in arms more than once. How Collingwood missed him! [*I have published a full account of my father's life and achievements, including his relationship with Nelson.*—A.C.]

Collingwood led us to a spacious drawing room where more military men waited, and the air was laden with wig powder and cigar smoke, and empty decanters stood about, for they had evidently worked through the night. A table was covered in maps, and Collingwood made straight for it with his bits of news garnered from the ministries, and he and his fellows immediately began to draw bold charcoal lines on the charts. They spoke gravely, these men of privilege and power—and every so often they would lapse into French, for many of them shared an education in a country now their enemy. As they worked runners would come bearing more messages, and Collingwood and the others would scribble notes to be taken away.

One oddity in this company was an older woman, plainly dressed and plain of face, perhaps in her fifties, who sat quietly by a window, her hands folded on her lap. I scarcely noticed her at the time. She was, I would learn, Miss Caroline Herschel, sister of the famous astronomer.

And in the middle of all this a dog bounded in, a big, loose-boned mongrel who

made straight for Collingwood, to be greeted by a tickle from that stern admiral. This was Bounce, and much beloved.

There were a few domestics hovering, and Anne snapped out orders for breakfast, coffee and a replenishment of the whisky decanters. Then she turned to me. "You will be a guest here—at least for now; I don't know how long we will stay. Make sure Parsons serves you with an adequate breakfast. If you need to sleep, a change of clothes . . . I myself will bathe, I think, while I have the chance." She glanced at her father, his reading glasses on his nose and leaning on the table as if bringing relief to rheumatic joints. "As for asking *him* to rest, I know it's futile. If you will excuse me, sir—"

I nodded, too weary to cheek her, and she withdrew.

Clavell was at my side. "Can you read a map, Yankee?"

At the table, I recognized a detailed plan of the south of England, but I waved a hand. "Not with all this scribble. What's the news?"

"That the Corsican has landed. Well, you knew that." He pointed to blocks of scrawl at the Channel ports. "Seven army corps, all more or less deployed around London. Each corps comprises infantry, cavalry, artillery. The first under Bernadotte is at Chatham. The fourth and fifth under Soult and Lannes came in via Dover and Folkestone, the second and third under Marmont and Davout came through Portsmouth, and the sixth and seventh under Ney and Augereau landed at Plymouth. We believe all of these are bound for London, save Ney, who is driving north, probably intent on Bristol."

"And what of your defenses?"

He pointed to more scribbled blocks. "Here are our army groups, as of a few hours ago, at least. You have Sir Hew Dalrymple facing west, Sir John Moore in the east, and in the centre Colonel Wellesley waiting for the second and third corps."

"A colonel?"

"Probably a battlefield general by now, I shouldn't wonder. A good man, from Irish nobility. Made a name for himself out in India—though his brother was governor-general there. Well, we'll know the wisdom of that appointment soon, for I expect battle to be closed within hours, if not already. The French like to march without a baggage train; they provision themselves from the country, and it makes for a rapid advance."

And, I knew from experience in America, it was hellish to have your family and your home in the way of such a locust-like advance. "What are your prospects?"

"As long as we had supremacy of the sea, we were protected by the Channel. And if Nelson had been at sea yesterday, perhaps Napoleon would have launched his armies east, not west, for one day there will be a reckoning between this 'usurper' who killed a Bourbon prince, and the crowns of Prussia and Austria and Russia . . . But he is not in Germany; here he is in England, for he evidently means to settle his western flank before he confronts the east. Do you Americans still call our soldiers 'lobster backs'? England's a lobster with a tough shell—but it's damn thin, and once breached what's inside is pretty soft."

"You ain't hopeful."

He shrugged. "Look at their faces—look at Collingwood's. I am confident England will survive this brutal assault in the long run. I am less confident about the course of this day."

Now Anne rejoined us. She was out of her mannish jacket and leggings, and wore a sober but flattering dress of rich purple velvet, and with her blonde hair up and powder on her face I was struck by her attractiveness—I don't say beauty, for she was no Venus, but she had a strength and composure in her regular features, and a spark in her eyes not unlike her father's icy blue that quite caught the breath.

Clavell bowed to her and asked after her health—but she took *my* arm, and I felt a



quite unreasonable surge of pleasure. "Now I'm refreshed we have much to discuss," she said.

I ventured, "You're the first English girl I ever met, you know, and not at all what I expected."

"Am I to be flattered or insulted?"

I glanced at her boldly. "Right now, in this fancy room, in that dress, you look the part. But not twenty-four hours past you were hauling me from the wreck of my *Nautilus*."

"You can blame my father for that," she said. "The Admiral never wanted his daughters to embrace the life of a gentlewoman—a round of elegance, housekeeping, dress, of neighbors and dance and music and the season—a life of nothingness. *He* encouraged us to study geometry and languages and the philosophies, and the practical arts—he wanted us to learn how to survive, he said."

"If the Ogre is loose in England, he was wise. Well, I find it blasted attractive."

She raised an eyebrow. "Be careful, sir. This is an English drawing room, and you are very forward." She glanced at John Clavell. "You don't want to be dueling over my honor, do you?" [*I may remark that this is an abbreviated account, turned to the author's favor, of a rather more coarse conversation.—A.C.*] I had a reply ready, but she cut me off. "Ben, you must pay attention. I suspect we have little time before the Napoleonic storm hits, and it is important you begin to learn what is asked of you. Come—meet Miss Herschel."

I was brought to the middle-aged lady who sat by the window, and she stood, grave, composed, her rheumy eyes very sharp. After we were introduced, she said with a sharp Teutonic accent, "You have never heard of me, but you have heard of my brother William."

I gathered this was a standard opening salvo from the old battleaxe. I could not fail to know of the astronomer, immersed as I had been in engineering circles all my adult life—and you know him, he is the man who discovered the planet Uranus, a globe beyond Saturn that is the first new world to have been found since the ancients first counted the wandering stars—which is a remarkable thing. "Odd. I always imagined he was English!"

"We are from Hanover," she said. "Refugees of French aggression, under the old regime. My brother found work as a musician first, actually. But gradually he developed his interests in astronomy. And when I joined him we began to make significant observations, and discoveries."

Anne said, "Mr. Herschel's most recent telescopic observations have a bearing on the case of the Phoebians. Indeed, they were mandated by the Grand Council."

I nodded. "Very well. So why am I meeting the sister rather than the brother? Where is he, at this time of crisis?"

Anne and Caroline shared a glance. "Not here," Caroline said. "Fled to the north, where the Cylinder is being built." Which was the first mention I had heard of this device! "But it is of no matter. I can explain the Martian observations to you as well as he could have. After all, it was I who made the bulk of them, and analyzed the rest."

I got a whiff of the sibling rivalry which dominated the household of the famous astronomer. With my own experience of Fulton, I sympathized; this Miss Caroline wasn't the only junior to have had her credit stolen by a more glamorous partner. But I was growing impatient, and picked on the key word. "Martian?"

## VII

It had all begun with the first descent of the Phoebians.

I learned that far from being inviolate since the Norman landing in 1066, England



had suffered an invasion as recently as 1720, and not by the French or any human enemy, but by Phoebeans, a foe from beyond the sky. The key truth of these creatures is that they are animals of the cold, not the warm; they can barely stand our earthly temperatures, and it was the thaw of a spring day that year that halted their advance, not any human action. Still, after the Ice War, they persisted in the cold fastnesses of northern lands where the ice never melts.

The Phoebeans had fallen in a shower across the world's northern latitudes, and other battles were fought, though England took the brunt of it. In other lands, though, across intervening decades full of the usual famine, war, pestilence, and revolt, the strange episode of the Phoebeans was largely forgotten—not in England, though. And even here their great splashing across the north was made a secret—the incident was ascribed instead to the fall of a comet—because it was hoped that the Phoebeans could be harnessed to Britain's national interest. Typical English!—I thought.

Anne said, "Even as that first assault ran its course, the government established a Grand Council of philosophers to study the issue—Isaac Newton was its first president. Ben, your own ancestor, Sir Jack Hobbes, was involved in the '20. Accounts vary, but it seems he saved Newton's life! And that was why he was knighted. He became a rich man, but briefly . . ."

"Ah! That explains some of my family's murkier secrets." Sir Jack, having dissipated one fortune in England, came to the colonies in search of another in the tobacco plantations of the southern states. He disgraced himself even by the standards of that rough and ready region, and disappeared, but the family did inherit his native cunning. I was lucky enough to convert a certain mechanical and mathematical aptitude into employment as an apprentice engineer in the dockyards of the north-east states—where, eventually, I fell into the company of Robert Fulton, with his dreams of installing modern steam engines in American boats and mines. "But I am not a 'sir,'" I said regretfully. "The title vanished along with my father's older brother, and the family silver. And so I am to face the foe once matched by my ancestor, eh?"

I learned that the Phoebeans themselves had caused little problem on earth since 1720. In '45 the Jacobite rebels had tried to use wild Phoebeans from the Highlands to support their assault on English towns—an experiment that cost more Scottish lives than English. Captain Cook, probing the northern latitudes, had spotted signs of Phoebean activity in the Canadian Arctic. The philosophers of successive generations had pondered on the nature of the Phoebeans, and where they had come from. But meanwhile, it seemed, a new threat from the Phoebeans was gradually discerned.

"It is believed that the inner worlds are rock, predominantly, like the earth, like the dead moon," Caroline said to me. "This is because they are warmed by the sun. But the sun's heat falls off with distance by an inverse square law, as a Newtonian analysis shows. And there is an imaginary frontier in the solar system, called the ice line, beyond which the worlds—like Jupiter's moons, perhaps, or my brother's discovery Uranus—must be dominated by ice. It is cold out there, Mister Hobbes. Cold enough for the Phoebeans to prosper."

"Then let them have those icy worlds, for no human could live there, and thank God for that!"

"But," Anne said, "there is a world on the border, as you might say—"

"Mars," I guessed.

I learned now, to my surprise, that the surface of the planet Mars can be seen from earth through the great telescopes, and for more than a hundred years banks of what may be snow and ice have been observed at that world's poles, to wax and wane with Mars's own seasons.

Caroline said, "Where there is ice, the Phoebeans may play. Even before the Ice War, the Italian astronomer Maraldi observed a strange sparking of light at the Mar-

tian ice banks—that, it was retrospectively determined, coincided with the passage by Mars of the very comet that brought the Phoebeans to the earth.”

“Good Lord! Phoebeans landing on Mars, do you think?”

“You will understand that since ’20 Mars has been examined intensively for evidence of Phoebean activity, by astronomers under the direction of the Council.”

“Ah. And now you believe you have found such evidence?”

“Over the last few years my brother and I have observed the clear growth of a patch of ice far from Mars’s poles, quite an anomaly. I can show you the drawings. Some observers believe they see movement—I cannot be sure, but I do not dismiss such observations—and Phoebeans on Mars could surely grow to a mighty size.”

I saw the drift. “You fear that Mars is the Phoebeans’ Boulogne! That they are massing forces to jump to Earth!” I tried not to laugh, but failed; the grave figures gathered around the campaign maps looked on me as if I had giggled at a funeral. “The Phoebeans have Jupiter and Uranus! What would they want of little Earth, where they cannot live anyhow?”

Caroline shrugged. “What does Napoleon want of England? Yet he is here.”

“We can’t take the chance, Ben,” Anne said. “That’s what the Grand Council believes, and the Minister of War concurs—and the Prime Minister. Even as we face the French, we *must* deal with this incipient threat from the sky. We must ensure the Phoebeans do not cross the ice line.”

“Deal with it? How? By blockading Mars, as your father and his navy chums blockaded France for a decade? Oh, this is all—fantastic!”

Caroline said gravely, “You must absorb what has been said to you, youngster. For there is a responsibility for you to bear, and much for you to learn.”

Maybe so, but now wasn’t the time to learn it, for Collingwood himself came stalking over from his map table, a fresh note in his hand, his face like thunder. “We must leave,” he said. “We must reach the Cylinder site at Ulgham before it is overrun by the French—and complete the mission.”

Anne gasped. “It is confirmed?”

He held up his missive. “I have Pitt’s final orders to proceed.”

Anne hesitated one breath, then nodded. “We’re ready, father.” She was a brave spirit, and a sturdy support for the Admiral! “But I thought we would have a little longer.”

“So did we all.” He drew us to the table, and showed us a big summary map. “Our defenses have folded more rapidly even than we feared. Of the army groups, two out of three buckled under the Ogre’s usual tactics, the concentrated artillery fire and the rapid infantry advances. Two of three! Only Wellesley holds out, to the south. Refugees from Kent and Sussex are already in the capital, streaming over the bridges and clogging up the movement of men and materiel. And French advance units have been seen as far forward as Richmond and Greenwich. Their drums and trumpets can be heard in the city—damn them! Wellesley must fall back, and regroup, for he is England’s last hope now.” He grasped his letter from Pitt. “And we have our own mission. Come! You too, Clavell—Hobbes—Miss Herschel . . . I pray it is not too late already. Bounce! Here, boy. . . !”

## VIII

**S**o we hurried from a household that was already decanting into a series of broughams, each driven by tough marines. But there were not enough vehicles, and I found myself jammed into a requisitioned London cab with Lieutenant Clavell.

As we rolled away I peered out of my cab, fascinated by London in the full daylight. Above a carpet of houses rose the threadlike spires of Wren churches, and to

the east floated the dome of St. Paul's. On this dull December morning, a pall of yellow-orange smoke from the night's fires hung over it all. But already I could see new smoke plumes rising up, all around the skyline. This, I learned from Clavell, was the work of the Londoners themselves, or their government; the city would be burned to the ground rather than afford Bonaparte any succor.

We galloped north, through St. Pancras and Islington and Highbury, and out of town. My cab, an affair of lacquered black wood with padded button-leather seats and a wooden knee protector that you swung into place, was a comfortable enough vehicle for rolling half a mile down the Mall, perhaps, but Collingwood meant to make for Newcastle and beyond at a cracking pace of fifty miles per day [*a pace we bettered in the event—A.C.*], and though England's turnpikes are better than most you'll find in America, for me with my poor face blasted by the north wind it was a damn uncomfortable trip—and made worse by the fact that for most of it I had the company of the spiky Clavell.

That's not to say, of course, that we were not among the more fortunate on that route. Even now the refugee flood was gathering, with the main arteries like our own fast becoming clogged with carriages and carts, and folk on foot and loaded with goods like bipedal snails—even rolls of carpet and couches on their backs, or their servants'. I wondered what the Phoebeans' strange telescopes might make of London if they saw it that day, a city of millions of souls like an ants' nest stirred by a burning stick.

And we saw worse, even on that first afternoon of traveling. In towns like Watford and Tring and Leighton Buzzard and Bletchley [*spellings have been corrected.—A.C.*] I saw the signs of plundering and looting, even whole districts burning, and in places the roadside was strewn with dead horses, broken carts, scrapped ammunition boxes, and silent mounds of corpses. I saw it in America, and I was not surprised to see it again. Clavell, though, looked shocked, and I felt a stab of mean pleasure at his shame—for no French soldier had yet penetrated this far. The depredation had surely been inflicted by *English soldiers*, reeling from their defeat and now fleeing north, a mob of armed savages driven by lust, drunkenness, and hunger.

We traveled through the night and for much of the next day, at the end of which we came to a bridge across the river Nene and entered into Northampton, where we would stop the night. This town was populous enough to have deterred the retreating English units, and far enough from London that the lurid news from the south seemed not yet to be believed. Again I had come to a town pretty much at ease with itself. It would learn; it would learn.

Clavell arranged for lodgings, supplies, and fresh horses, and Miss Herschel requisitioned a room in a hotel. Collingwood went off to consult at an army field headquarters that had been established in a cattle market, just north of the river. As Anne accompanied him, I went along. The Admiral walked with a terrible stiffness, his rheumatism not helped by the hours on the road.

Somewhat to my surprise, Wellesley was here. Having been given a promotion by the Duke of York to some generalship or other and made field commander of whatever forces the British could still assemble, he was falling back in anticipation of making a fresh stand somewhere in the north, his sappers blowing up every bridge and mining every road behind him. But the French were pursuing him, whole army corps having bypassed London, and it was a lethal chase that could end only in battle.

I actually saw Wellesley, briefly, though I was not introduced to the man, as he greeted Collingwood. A good-looking fellow in his late forties, with reddish-brown hair and a prominent nose, he wore a plain-looking uniform that was all the more impressive for its lack of ostentation. I did not hear him utter a word. Of course the whole world will know Wellesley by the time this war is won [*more familiarly as the Duke of Wellington.—A.C.*]; I wish I had cut a lock of his hair!

While Collingwood met with the general and his staff, Anne and I walked around the camp. The men were setting themselves up under canvas. A brigade of riflemen arrived as we watched, weary from the road, each man laden with a heavy pack and his weapon, either a Brown Bess musket or a Baker rifle. A cart drew up loaded with their wounded, and as a surgeon unwrapped one man's bandaged leg you could see the flies buzzing, and I turned away before Anne did.

For the journey Anne had changed back into her mannish gear, of trousers and boots and jacket, and with her fair hair done up in a bun under her hat. "I suppose you think we are all cowards, we English," she said suddenly.

The remark startled me. "Why do you say that?"

"Because since Worthing you have seen our armies fold and our citizenry flee and our towns burn. Even Wellesley, our best soldier, plots a retreat."

I shook my head. "I sense Wellesley knows what he's doing; he will pick a fight with the Ogre on his ground and his terms. And you're no coward to flee a hurricane. I saw the French armies at work in America, remember—you Europeans have yet to have a real taste of it."

She frowned. "The French campaign in America was not much mentioned here, in the newspapers. There was little respect for the American show of arms, and I suspect the French effort was belittled because of it."

"And so you underestimated us, and Napoleon."

I had seen some of it, as I had been in New Orleans when Napoleon's army descended in the summer of the Year Three, a sneak landing of a force supposedly sent over to subdue Santo Domingo—this at a time when some in the government hoped that Napoleon would cede all his remaining possessions in America to Washington! I was working for Fulton then, and doing some business for him in that French territory to progress his steam engine projects, there being little enthusiasm in America, and little cash.

It's difficult to remember now, but much of the world then had high hopes of Napoleon, as a champion of liberty around the globe. Well, what he was championing was the interests of his nascent French empire against the British, and once landed he burned his way inland, stirring up a ferment and liberating the slaves in each state he crossed even while his soldiers plundered. His purpose was evidently to turn North America French all over—and, ultimately, to use the mighty resources of the Atlantic realm to wage his wars against England and the monarchies of Europe.

"We put up a fight," I said to Anne, "and I saw some of it; but we were a young country with a small army, and officers that were either sixty-year-old veterans of the War of Independence or political appointees, and beyond that only the militia, ill-trained and worse equipped—and we had no money to fight a war anyhow." That was in part because of the British blockade of trade, an action I always believed would have led to war were there not bigger fish to fry. "There was a decisive battle at Savannah, after which the army was licked and only the militias remained, but Napoleon rejected peace overtures from both federal and state governments, and went on until he had sacked Richmond, Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and at last besieged New York City itself.

"Yet the country is not subdued. The militia pretty quickly dissolved into fighters for freedom—irregular soldiers if you like, cutting at the French and melting back into the woods and the mountains. But the French strike back by executing townsfolk and farmers." I fell silent, my head full of one image I had seen: a woodsman naked, castrated, his hands and feet cut off and his eyes put out, nailed upside down to a tree; alongside him a Frenchman in similar condition. I spared her these details. [*And if he had not, for I had the stomach for it, I might have thought better of him.*—A.C.] "It's become a bitter but low-level struggle, ma'am, with atrocities on both sides. A new sort of war, not between armies, but between nations."

"If Wellesley fails, so it may be here," Anne said grimly.

"You'd better pray not. Of course it need not have come to pass if the British government had come to America's aid, as requested."

She bridled at that. "It is a bugbear to my father, how Jefferson's administration railed against all things British and courted Napoleon, only to come crying for help when the Ogre turned. Anyhow the British government did send arms to the continent."

"To equip an Indian army under the Shawnee! Thus hoping to create an even bigger problem for the Americans in the future. Perhaps Pitt and his predecessors should have spent the nation's money on the Royal Navy, rather than chasing phantoms from Mars, and if so he'd have had the muscle to stop Napoleon striking across the Atlantic at us—and indeed to have given Nelson a fighting chance at Trafalgar."

This irritated her, and she snapped back at me, "And what of you, Ben Hobbes? What's your story? You bleat about the English, but did you fight the French on your own soil?"

I shrugged. "If you must know, I was taken captive after the siege of Baltimore. I was questioned brisk—the French inquisitors refined their techniques during the Terror, you know. I would not be alive now if they had not learned I had worked with Fulton. I was shipped off thence to Paris to work on the *Nautilus* and other designs."

But Fulton, an honorable man, had taken against his French customers the moment Napoleon set foot in New Orleans, and soon effected an escape to England. I, left behind, did whatever was asked of me, intent on staying alive.

Anne was curious, confused, angry. Well, it was a confused and angry time, an age when the highest ideals of liberty and brotherhood had been wrested by a monster, and you weren't sure who to fight. Yet my feelings at that moment were different. Her face, flushed with the cold and her strong feelings, her mouth softly open as her breath came rapid—it gave her a look of lust, not unlike the vibrant passion of the New Orleans whores who had once warmed my bed, and I imagined taking her there and then in that muddy English field! Dare I venture, she shared some of what I was feeling [*I did not.*—A.C.]. But she turned away, and the moment was past, and she walked briskly back to her father.

A fusilier not far from me, sawing steadily at the corns on his bare feet, shrugged at me and smiled as if to say, "Women! War's easy by comparison." But I did not dignify his familiarity.

## IX

We jolted over more bruising roads, doing fifty or sixty or seventy miles a day. We stopped at Nottingham and Leeds, and joined the Great North Road, and it was clear to me we were outstripping most of Wellesley's forces and the deserters and all but the most panicky of refugees. Yet even here the country was in turmoil, for the news traveled even faster than we did, and there were ever more excited rumors of the approach of the Ogre, or of fresh French troops landing on the northern coasts.

On the fourth night we reached Darlington, yet another small town on yet another river. And here the pattern differed, for after one night in the town our party diverged from the main trunk road and headed off east, toward Stockton. We paused before we reached the town, our broughams and carriages pulling over from the rough road surface, the marines clambering down and blowing on their mittened hands, and the dog bounding off after rabbits. Collingwood, Clavell, Anne, and a number of the senior people formed up for a walk across the desolate country—and I was summoned too, for Collingwood said I was to meet his "Troglydite genius of the mines."

And it was a mine I was taken down into, entirely to my surprise! We were met at a hut by a site manager, black in the face with coal dust, and we descended by ladders and galleries deep into the earth—down, down we went, more than three hundred yards below the crust. Men shuffled to and from their shifts at the faces, and I saw clanking carts dragged along iron rails by boys and ponies. In that cold, dank, dark place, nobody spoke or sang. A place of dismal subterranean labor!

And in one place I saw something that evoked unwelcome memories. Lying in a deep, shallow gallery cut into a seam was a kind of dome, shallow, downturned, its upper carapace milky. I could see no reason to encounter a Phoebean monster down here—perhaps this was a salt dome, or other geologic feature.

At last Collingwood paused, and his men gathered around, and I saw that we were poised above a pit. Men stood about, and the place was illuminated by lanterns suspended high from a beam, as if to shed light but little heat. Down in the pit, blocks of ice stood proud of heaps of straw. (I wondered from whence they got the ice.) And in the straw lay lumpy rocks, pale, rather like eggs, and I thought I saw something stir—small and furtive, like a mouse, yet it had a certain mechanical grace that was like no living thing. All this glimpsed in shadows.

It was evident we were waiting for somebody, and Collingwood grew impatient. "Mr. Watt? Are you here in the dark? 'Tis Cuddy Collingwood come to call!" At last a fellow came lumbering out of the shadow, in his late sixties perhaps, short, heavy-set, and evidently not in the best of health, for he wheezed and coughed throughout. Collingwood introduced him to me with a kind of flourish. "I am sure an engineer like you, Hobbes, will have heard of James Watt! The steam engineer *par excellence*."

But I disappointed him in my non-recognition.

Watt, wiping oily hands, spoke with a Scotch accent so broad I could scarce comprehend it, and I offer only a rough translation here. "Ah, well, my days of glory with the steam are long behind me. Though, Hobbes, you may have heard of my work on the Newcomen engine—how I increased its efficiency manifold with my separated condenser, and, by applying it to steam pumps, vastly increased the depth to which mines such as this could be reached—no? But if I had not been diverted by my work on the Phoebeans—"

As if on cue there was a sharp crack from the pit, almost like a musket shot, and everyone turned. As I looked down I saw that one of those eggs had shattered into shards, like an over-heated pot.

Anne came to stand by me, close enough that I could smell her rosewater and powder. It was a welcome human closeness in that place of dank darkness and strangeness. She pointed. "I love to stand over such nurseries, and watch."

"Nurseries?"

"We collect the eggs from the big queens we have caged in the Highlands. Follow it for a few hours and you can see their ontogenesis, or part of it. . . . See, the egg fragments will recombine to form a disc, like that one." And I saw it, like a telescope lens of smooth white ice nestling in the straw. "And then, if we are lucky—oh, look in the corner!" There was another disc. And I saw how a ring of pillars not a foot high, slim as pencils, shot up around the rim of the disc, and then the disc itself slid up, somehow supported by the pillars, until it roofed over them so it was like a toy of some colonnaded Greek temple. And then the pillars, still upright, slid back and forth under the lens-roof, and the whole assemblage slid through the straw—not mechanical, yet not like life—our kind of life, anyhow. It was closest to a crab of anything terrestrial, I suppose.

"That's how they're born," Watt growled. "Let it loose in the stuff of the earth, the water and the rock, and it will grow as big as you like."

It was a nursery, I saw—a nursery of Phoebeans, there in the English ground! I de-



manded, "Why would you encourage the growth of such dangerous monsters? I thought you claimed to be at war with them, Admiral!"

Watt answered, "For their energy, sir—for their sheer power. You can control 'em, you know, with a tickle of electric. And you can always bank a fire under them and let Newton's Calenture seize up their limbs. Use them right, use them as draught animals, and the energy they deliver far exceeds any steam engine I could dream up! And it's to this I've devoted my declining years."

Collingwood clapped me on the back. "And, Hobbes, it is by using their own energies against them that I intend to thwart the Phoebeans' empire-building. Energy and empire, my lad! Those are the words that will characterize this new century of ours."

Anne pouted. "Not 'liberty,' father? Or 'rights'?"

Once more I wondered to what insane adventure I was becoming committed.

Collingwood grasped the old engineer's slumped shoulders. "And I've come to collect you, James. It's time. I have Pitt's own instructions." He patted his breast pocket. "You must come to Ulgham."

Watt looked troubled. "The Cylinder? But so much is untried. . . . Must we do this so soon?"

"I'm afraid so, for the French are on the way."

And that was the first a wide-eyed Watt had heard of Napoleon's invasion of England. It's the same with many an obsessive thinker, so I've learned—Fulton had something of it about him—his own work fills up the world for him, until the devil comes knocking at the door.

A runner came to find Collingwood. Lieutenant Clavell took the message, read it by lamplight, handed it to the Admiral, then gave me a tug on the sleeve. "Come with me, Hobbes. We've a little scouting to do. It's the French. An advance party's been spotted."

"What use will I be?"

"There are naval officers among 'em. . . . I'll make our apologies to the Admiral."

And so he led me away, and I looked back at Anne over her pit of Phoebean crab-babies, and wondered if I would see her again!

## X

A silent marine led Clavell and me and a couple of companions across the country about a mile, and brought us to a ridge of high ground. And here, lying on damp English grass, we gazed down upon the French party. They had been spotted by Collingwood's scouts, for, as small a force as he commanded, each time we stopped he had his men roam the country for signs of the French. And tonight that cautious strategy had paid off.

There might have been fifty of them, gathered around a handful of fires. Horses grazed where they had been tied beneath a copse of trees. There were no farm buildings nearby, but the field was roughly walled, and I saw they had stolen a couple of young sheep they were skinning with their knives. Their voices drifted on the night, coarse French jokes drifting across the north English country.

"Clearly a scouting party," murmured Clavell, into my ear. "See how they've made ready for the night in that copse." They had used loose branches and dead leaves to make shelters. "It's the way the French armies work, living off the land—you know that. If you're unlucky they'll take apart your house and your furniture to make their bonfires. It can't be a coincidence they've come this far and fast. After all, we're ahead even of Wellesley's advanced units. There are navy officers among 'em. I hoped you might recognize them."

"It was a damn big flotilla that crossed the Channel, Lieutenant!"



"Nevertheless you were with it, and now you are here, and now *they* are here. Take a look."

He handed me his glass; I peered through the eyepiece. There was indeed at least one French navy officer among the gossiping troopers—and, to my shock, I knew him. "Gourdon. I was under his command on board the *Indomitable*—from which the *Nautilus* was launched. I'd recognize that bloated fool anywhere, and that ugly pigtail."

Clavell considered this. "Here's what I conclude, then. You must have been seen when you were picked up by the *Terrier*. The Ogre and his marshals are devils for detail, and they must have wondered why you are so important that the Royal Navy sought you out on the night England was invaded. Or perhaps they know something of Collingwood's project, and of his employment of Fulton, and Fulton's connection to *you*. There are spies everywhere! Either way they have risked this small party of men to track you down and find out what you're up to—and why you're so valuable." He glanced at me, his eyes invisible in the dark as he whispered. "You're an important man, Hobbes."

"So it seems. Anyhow, either way, they've found us."

Clavell shook his head. "Our diversion to the mine has fooled them—they should have watched our tracks more carefully. Find us? Not yet, they haven't—"

And he was proved wrong in a devastating instant.

There was a roar, like thunder—but the sky, clouded, had contained no hint of a storm. I had been in a land war before, and I had heard rumors of the new technologies, and had an inkling of what was coming, and I ducked down against the ground, my arms wrapped over my head. Out of the corner of my eye I saw streaks of light scrawl across the sky, like miniature suns, or Phoebean comets, flying with a banshee wail. And then the shells fell around us. I felt the detonations shake the earth, and hot metal hailed, and men screamed. A barrage of Congreve rockets; the latest thing!

When it was over I got up, coughing. The air was full of smoke and the stink of gunpowder. Glancing at my companions, I saw that two men lay unmoving, another was little more than a bloody splash in a crater, and the last was hovering over Clavell, who lay on his back with a piece of blackened, twisted metal protruding from his gut. And I, lucky Ben Hobbes (or perhaps I was just the quickest to duck), was entirely unharmed!

Clavell spoke, and my ears were ringing so I had to bend close to hear. "Cleverer than us, Ben, the damn French! Split their forces, and their scouts saw us, and got us with a lucky shot."

"Nothing lucky about it," I opened. "Rockets take some aiming."

"Probably one of our own batteries, stolen from the abandoned defenses of Portsmouth or Plymouth, for the French have nothing like 'em . . ." He coughed, and groaned as the metal in his gut twisted.

The marine pulled at him. "Sir—we have to go. That main party will be coming for us." He was an honest lad with an accent that was strange strangled to my ears—a Newcastle boy he was, one of Collingwood's own "Tars of the Tyne."

Clavell feebly pushed him away. "No, Denham. Too late for me. Take Hobbes back to the mine, and warn the Admiral." He eyed me, his face a bloody mask. "For you've won, haven't you, Ben? If there ever was a competition between us for the attention of Miss Collingwood . . . and you have a chance, don't you? You could slip away. Denham here couldn't stop you. Go, seek your fortune elsewhere and leave the French and English to smash each other to pieces. . . ."

I had a bubble of spite, even though he was evidently a dying man. "Maybe I have the right. You press-ganged me into this, remember."

"True. But if you don't help Collingwood finish his Cylinder, in the long run all of us will be lost, all our children. . . ."

"I have no children."

"Nor I . . . I have nephews . . . I had hoped . . ." He peered at me, his eyes oddly milky. "Are you still here, or a bad dream? Go, man, if you're going. . . !" He coughed, and blood splashed from his mouth and over his tunic.

I hesitated for a further second. But if you are reading this manuscript, you know what choice I made. Damn my sentiment! [*And God be thanked for the grain of honor that lodged in you, Ben Hobbes, for if you had made another choice, as poor Clavell said, all would have been lost.*—A.C.]

## XI

**W**e raced back to the mine. Over my shoulder, I could hear the French drums as they marched after us.

Collingwood's party, evidently drawn by the noise of the rocket fire, had come to the surface. Anne was at her father's side, that brave jaw stuck out, her eyes clear. Watt was with them, and the marines were preparing the carriages. Miss Herschel, who had chosen to stay in her brougham under a heap of blankets, peered out, curious and anxious by halves.

Collingwood took in our condition at a glance, and he could hear the French approach as well as I could. He said calmly to Denham, "The Lieutenant and the rest?"

"Lost, sir. I tried to make him come—"

Collingwood put his hand on the man's shoulder. "All right, Geordie. But the French are coming—Mr. Hobbes?"

"They are perhaps fifty. No artillery but well equipped with muskets and rifles from what I saw—"

"And Congreve rockets," Anne murmured.

"Perhaps we can take shelter in the mine," I said.

"And let them smoke us out, or starve us, or bayonet us in the dark like pigs in a sty? Not much of an option, Mr. Hobbes," said Collingwood.

"But it need not come to that," said James Watt. He stood, hands on hips, eyeing the country to the east, from which direction the French were marching. "As it happens we're planning a little open-cast mining just that way. . . Mr. Hobbes, do you see the bent elm yonder? How long would it take for the French to reach that point, do you think?"

It took us a few seconds of estimation, for the French seemed to be walking at a comfortable pace, confident of trapping us. We settled on five minutes.

Watt grunted. "Not long to prepare. Admiral, do you have a decent timepiece on you? Count out the five minutes. When it's done, call down to me." And with that he hurried off, back into his mine workings.

Anne frowned. "What's he up to?"

Collingwood allowed himself a grin. "I think I know." He took his watch from his breast pocket and snapped it open. "Five minutes, then. In the meantime we should prepare for the eventuality that he fails." He marched around the site, surveying the military potential of a handful of broughams and other conveyances, the ditches and shabby huts of the mine works, his few marines and their paltry firearms. He hefted his own musket. "Let's use what cover we have. Make sure we have a run back to the mine—we should not get separated." The men, seeking cover, melted into the shadows of the vehicles and the workings. "Anne—"

"I will fight."

"If you must, you will, I know that, child. But for now, please take Miss Herschel into the safety of the mine." He handed her his own musket. "It's an order, Miss Collingwood."

"Yes, sir." And so they parted, without an embrace or a soft word, yet it was as tearful a moment as I can remember in my own soulless life. [*The author exaggerates.—A. C.*]

The Admiral turned to me. "We have spare firearms, at least." He tossed one to me. "Do you know how to load it, Mr. Hobbes?"

"Learned it at my mother's knee," I said, putting on the Yankee vowels.

"That must have been a formidable knee."

"But, Admiral—Mr. Watt's five minutes?"

"Lord!" He had entirely forgotten, and he checked his watch. "Thirty seconds left."

"Here they come!" cried Denham.

Seeking cover, I lay flat on the cold ground and crawled under a brougham. And I saw them come, silhouetted against the dim December afternoon sky, fifty men marching in step, and I heard their drums clatter and the brittle peal of trumpets. The French do like their music.

And as they started past that bent old elm, Collingwood called down: "Now, Mr. Watt!"

Nothing happened—not for long seconds. My own heart hammered, while the French unit marched as graceful as you please past that elm, and I saw them readying their muskets.

And then, for the second time that day, I heard a sound like thunder, but this time it came not from the sky but the ground. The drumming packed in, and the French stopped their march, and looked down at their feet, disturbed. Even at my distance, a good two hundred yards, I felt the ground shudder and the fittings of the brougham above me rattled and clattered.

And the crust of the earth broke, just as if a mighty fist had punched upward and out of it, and I saw pillars of ice slide into the air. Then the dome rose, the icy carapace of a Phoebean soaring upward along its slim legs. So this was how James Watt used the Phoebeans—this was how they made his mines for him! But this beast had erupted right beneath the French party, and they were raised up and scattered, and when they fell those wretches hit hard with screams and the crack of bone.

Denham shouted: "At 'em, lads!" And the marines dashed over the English mud, muskets and sabers ready, to finish off the Phoebean's work.

But I thought I saw a French naval officer, burly and pigtailed, running off into the dark.

## XII

**W**e returned to the Great North Road, passing through Durham and Gateshead and on to Newcastle, where the Roman route cuts through the city walls to cross the river Tyne. We arrived just six days after leaving London. By now every town and village we saw was in a ferment of preparation and evacuation, and that was nowhere more true than in Newcastle, where that late December Thursday a row of ships of the line were moored at the Quayside, their sails neatly reefed, and they were being unloaded of their guns.

We did not stop, but we were inevitably slowed by the bustle, and I looked around with some curiosity, for this was the site of my own ancestor's escapades during the Ice War—where the main force of Phoebeans, marching south around a tremendous Queen, was resisted by the townfolk. I saw the ruins of the castle, smashed to splinters by a Phoebean. Collingwood himself pointed this out to me, for he was traveling with me in my battered London cab now that my companion Clavell had been left in his grave at Darlington—and Collingwood, it turned out, had been born in that city, in a cut not far from the Quayside. Well, that day the city was battening down for an-

other siege, with every man and woman carrying guns or powder pouches or barrels of provisions, and small boys knocking holes in house walls with broom handles.

But Newcastle was also the eastern terminus of the Wall that the Romans built to span the neck of the country and keep out the hairy Caledonians. And when we left the city, following the road through a northern gate, Collingwood bade me look to the west to see what I could of the preparations being made there. Since the Ice War, the Wall, which was now called the Geordie Wall, had been extended and heightened, and turned into a mighty barrier against the advance of any Phoebeans who might come strolling this way from the north. The old Roman mile forts had been turned into gun towers and ammunition dumps, and before the Wall's northern face the Roman vallum, a huge ditch and earthwork, had been deepened and spiked with blocks and iron bars. All this was decades old and dilapidated, but now frantic work was going on all along the Wall.

Collingwood said, "They're turning the Wall around. Can you see? They have stripped the ships on the river of their big guns, and are fixing them here to replace the rusting veterans of the Ice War. They're digging out a new vallum before the southern face, too. It's here that Wellesley plans to make his stand—or specifically further west of here, near a fort called Housesteads, where the Romans built their Wall to follow a natural ridge. Wellesley believes in using the land as an ally, and in that, evidently, he has the instincts of the Caesars' generals."

"There are worse plans, no doubt," I murmured. "But I can see one obvious flaw—which is that if I were Napoleon, I would try to flank Wellesley by sending a corps or two through the Wall's obvious weak point—Newcastle itself!"

Collingwood nodded soberly. "The man will surely have a go. But he won't find much of a welcome in Newcastle, any more than in London. The Geordies will fight, Hobbes—every wall will be loopholed to facilitate musket fire, every street barricaded, every house will hide an assassin. We have learnt the lesson of you Americans and how you have resisted the French. Now it is our turn." He said this with a cold certainty, all the more impressive for its lack of passion—I reminded myself that this area was Cuddy's own, and he knew the grit of the people.

But we, intent on our own mission, pressed on north.

In the country north of Newcastle I saw more evidence of the Ice War of '20. The ground was slashed by a vallum they called Newton's Dyke, but it was overgrown now and bridged to take the road. And the ground here was cratered, as if mighty rockets had fallen; these pits had been left by Phoebeans, birthed in the ground and bursting thence. It must have been a tremendous sight!

And we passed through another town in a ferment of preparations, called Morpeth—where Collingwood had his home, and I imagined how Anne's heart would skip a beat at the closeness of her family. But even here we did not stop. Instead we followed a minor track out of town to the north-east, until we came to a village called Ulgham, a little rural place with nothing remarkable to it but an inn run by the local blacksmith. And from here we turned down a lesser track yet toward what appeared to be the head of a small coal mine.

That name, by the way, which I prevailed upon Anne to spell for me, is pronounced "Uff-am," and it comes from a rather lovely Saxon phrase meaning "a vale haunted by owls." And you might remember it, unless I and Collingwood and Miss Caroline Herschel are all incinerated in the next few hours, for by the time you read this it has probably become the most famous name in the world.

For it is here, in that small mine, that Collingwood had built his Cylinder.

We clambered down from our carriages, relieved to have stopped moving. Miss Herschel seemed barely conscious, and poor rheumatic Collingwood could hardly

walk, but he went stomping off in search of managers and staff—and William Herschel, who should have been here.

We had already completed a long journey. But when I was taken into the installation—guided by an enthusiastic James Watt, who would not allow me to rest before seeing his works—I learned that a much longer jaunt was planned.

I call it an "installation." What word would you have me use? Was it a mine? Shafts had been dug into the earth, and indeed a little coal extracted, but the pits were needed for their subterranean climate of cool and damp—and, it seems, to contain the tremendous explosions that were to be generated here.

Was it a factory? It had the trappings of one, with workshops for the working of metal and rubber and glass and the manufacture of engines, and stores of provisions such as sheet metal and iron ore, and rutted trails where wagons had repeatedly passed, and a multitude of workers who dwelled in poor-looking huts, and young women working as clerks and secretaries in the offices. Watt introduced me to more toiling troglodytic engineers here, with names with which you may be familiar if you are a student of such industries: Richard Trevithick, the Cornishman who had once built a road carriage pulled by a steam engine, and John Wilkinson, known as "Iron Mad," said Watt, the ironmaster who made the first iron boat, and would be buried in an iron coffin! Thus, so Watt said, the industrial genius of the nation had been concentrated in this place.

And Watt proudly showed me an engine that made ice, with a series of pumps that expanded and compressed vapors, thereby removing heat from a volume—a process, he said, he had got from an American engineer called Oliver Evans, who I met once, but who unfortunately did not patent his work before he shared it with Watt! Manufacturing and engines, then—but clearly this place was not just a factory.

Was it a farm? Watt took me along galleries that overlooked pits where Phoebean eggs nestled and ice crabs scraped, watched over by boys with sticks in case any of those unearthly beasts began to grow unwieldy. Watt himself had his main office here, with a wall of windows overlooking the largest pit. Yes, a farm of Phoebeans.

But it was only as James Watt led me toward the heart, babbling in his rich Scots brogue, that I saw the true nature of the place.

One last gallery opened out into a pit, tall, roughly cylindrical, wide, with ladders fixed to its faces, and a disc of December sky above. And here stood an engine—or so I thought of it at first glance. Picture the boiler of some great steam engine, sat on its end; it was perhaps three yards wide and six tall. I could see it was constructed much as the hull of my *Nautilus* had been, of copper sheeting laid over ribs of iron, and there was the hand of Fulton. It was capped by a conical section, crudely welded in place, and metal vanes protruded from the lower hull. The walls were pierced by discs of glass, securely bolted. And at the cylinder's waist were hatches, almost like gun ports. All this buried in the earth!

Watt, not a natural orator, directed my attention to points of detail. "The nose cap is to deflect the flow of the air, much as the nose of your *Nautilus* pushed the water around her slim body. Of course it will only be necessary for the first miles of the ascent, and then may be discarded to afford a fresh observation port, forward-looking. The vanes too will act like rudders during those crucial first minutes, but will have little utility later, in the outer void—"

"What 'outer void'?" But I already knew the answer. "This isn't a steam engine, is it, Mr. Watt?"

"No, Ben, she is not," said Anne Collingwood, and she slipped her hand in mine; I had not noticed her approach, so absorbed had I been. "I think you know what she is—don't you?"

This place was a mine and a factory and a farm—all of these things. But it was also, I saw now, a graving yard. "This is a ship," I breathed.

"Yes. A ship of Space. And in this ship my father, for he will command her himself, *will sail to Mars*, and study the Phoebean nest there, and return in glory to report to the King himself on their activities! Come—let me show you inside—and you will know what we want of you."

I was too astonished to resist.

### XIII

A hatch was set in the ship's midriff. To get to it we walked around a gallery, and crossed by a ladder that bridged the gulf between pit wall and Cylinder. I had a bit of vertigo for I am no lover of heights, but I suppressed it, driven by curiosity, and a desire not to appear weak before the lovely Anne.

When we reached the ship I noted that the hatch opened outward, and would be sealed by a rubber collar. Inside, the Cylinder was indeed like a greater version of my *Nautilus*, with the same reassuring smell of copper and rubber and oil—but much wider and turned on its end, and illuminated throughout by lanterns. The interior was divided into decks by sections of open mesh flooring, although a solid deck of polished oak blocked off the bottom of the compartment. Oddly, there was carpet affixed to some of the walls, and bits of furniture bolted to the decks—chair, tables, hammocks, cupboards, even a big navigator's table of the type I had seen on the *Indomitable*. In a middle deck, I saw a ring of guns, naval weapons surely but of quite small bore, and sacks of shot and powder fixed to the walls nearby. These guns faced outward, their muzzles set against the hatches I had spotted in a ring around the hull, and I wondered what enemy ships they were meant to repel.

Thus, a ship designed to swim in Inter-planetary Space! I had never conceived of such a thing. But I was an engineer, and I inspected it and tried to understand how it would work.

Anne was watching me. "What do you think of her?"

"I think she looks mighty expensive. I can see where the money has been spent that might have built the navy ships to turn the war. . . ."

"You can see the hand of your mentor Fulton."

I grunted. "I immediately see he has left issues to resolve."

"Such as?"

"This hatch, for one thing." I pushed it back on its hinges. "My understanding is that the worlds swim in a vacuum—is that not the best philosophical thinking?"

"Else the planets through friction would spiral into the sun." She rapped on the hull. "The vessel is meant to contain its air."

"Then this hatch is a weak point. Anne, what do you understand of pressure? My *Nautilus* was built to withstand the greater pressure of the water outside its hull, which would overwhelm the air pressure within." I mimed squeezing an orange. "But in the case of your Cylinder, the greater pressure will come from the air *within*—the hull will seek to pop like a soap bubble. And here you have a hatch that longs to blow outward, on its hinges! Have your engineers rebuild this, Anne. Have the hatch open inward—and let it be shaped to sit in its frame so that the outward pressure of the air forces it closed, not open." I glanced around at the small portholes. "I may take a look at those windows too, before we're done."

Again she took my hand, and the simple physical touch thrilled me. "There can scarcely have been a stranger ship built in all human history. Yet you grasp her essence, immediately. This is precisely why we needed you here, Ben—for just such insights, once we lost Fulton. Please, let me show you more. . . ."

So we clambered up and down ladders affixed to the interior of the curving hull. I



was struck again by the squares of carpet affixed to the walls, and the way every chair and couch and cot was fitted with harnesses, and how there were little latches on the tables that could be used to fix plates and cups in place. At first I imagined that these were precautions in case this ship of Space should roll and pitch like an invasion barge in a Channel storm, but Anne tried to explain to me that while there are no storms in Space (or so the philosophers opine) a much stranger phenomenon will occur. "The Cylinder will be beyond the clutches of the gravity of earth, Ben. The engines' push will be brief—like the great thrust applied to a cannonball in the breach." She said no more, for now, of *how* that great thrust would be generated. "But after that the Cylinder, *and all her contents*, will fall freely between the worlds. And a crewman will bounce around inside this hull like a mouse in a hollow cannonball! It's all to do with Newton's calculations . . . Now can you see why there is carpet on the walls?"

I saw, and I was astonished anew.

That navigator's table was an expensive affair, and though a big compass was set in its surface I saw there were fine-looking Harrison chronometers, and that cupboards nearby were stocked with sextants and other equipment of the type, which the sailors use to measure the angles of the stars in the sky. "Nobody knows if a compass will work between the worlds," Anne said. "Or what meaning 'north' or 'south' may have! But the navigator will be able to track the curving path of the ship as she sails from Earth to Mars and back again, by mapping the shifting positions of the stars—and indeed Sun, Moon, Mars, and Earth itself."

"But why carry a navigation table at all?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"It would be futile to spread canvas in the windless vacuum of Space—wouldn't it? Then I cannot understand the good of all that patient charting and star-bothering if the ship cannot be controlled."

"Ah," she said, smiling. "A good question. And that is why this ship of reconnaissance has a gun deck."

Now I learned that the cannon mounted amidships were not, after all, for fighting Martian men o'war, but for steering! The Cylinder would have no rudder. But to deflect her course the crew would fire a cannon shot, in the *opposite* way she was desired to turn, and the recoil would do the rest—I myself had seen the violence of recoil of a cannon fired in anger. Of course this was a rough and ready method of steering, for a cannon's fire is scarce repeatable one ball to the next; but after such a shot you could take more measurements of the stars, and fire again, to tinker with your course in a secondary way. And thus the Cylinder would be steered to Mars and back, to the put-put of cannonballs fired off into the endless immensity of Space! All of this the architects of this strange mission were quite confident about, it seemed.

The cupboards were well stocked with clothing and blankets and the like, but I did wonder how the crew would keep warm in Space, for everybody knows how cold it can be if you climb a high mountain. But Anne explained that the problem would be to keep *cool*, rather than hot; the sunlight, to which the Cylinder would be exposed continually, would be more intense than on the clearest summer day. There was, however, an ingenious little heating system devised by Watt that ran on the combustion of oil; this at least would suffice to boil a kettle!

The galley, by the way, was a cleverly compact affair, and quite well stocked with meat and beans in sealed cans, and dried fruit that would keep, and such familiar comestibles as ship's biscuits. The crew would be three, Anne said—and the stock of food was intended to support them for a journey that might last years!

Regarding the more delicate matter of what emerges daily from the other end of a human being, Anne showed me an ingenious closet fitted with valves and levers,



which should suck one's daily offering out into the vacuum of Space, without exposing tender flesh to that airless condition. I made a mental note to check the integrity of the gadget. With liquid waste the situation would be different. It was recognized that a water tank sufficient for the trip would fill the hull and beyond, and so there was an elaborate system of filters, of sand and fine cloths and other materials, that would enable the urine produced on Tuesday to be drunk again on the Wednesday! This was based on systems developed over the years by desperate miners stuck down the shafts by rock falls and the like. I admit I gagged at the thought, and even Anne, who never liked to show weakness, wrinkled her pretty nose at the idea. [*This last detail is entirely the author's invention.*—A.C.] That business of the water, though, prompted me to think about the air that would be needed to keep that brave crew alive between the worlds.

She led me at last to the lowest deck of that copper hull, and we stood on the stout oak bulkhead. I saw three big brass bolts set on threads that penetrated the bulkhead, the bolts to be turned by twisting wheels. "And this," she said, "is the Cylinder's greatest marvel of all—the secret of how she will be able to thrust herself out of the atmosphere. All the crew will have to do is turn these wheels."

For this marvel we had to thank the restless brain of James Watt. It had been Watt's suggestion to use the Phoebeans' brute strength in mining. But he became intrigued as to *how* that great strength was generated, and to what further uses it could be put.

Anne said, "It's well known, and first observed by Newton, that if a Phoebean gets too hot he soon ceases to function. Newton called it a 'Calenture,' and it is profoundly useful in controlling the animals. It was Watt who first tried the obvious experiment of seeing what happens if you *melt* a Phoebean altogether." She grinned. "He blew up his laboratory, and nearly took himself with it! It seems obvious, Ben. The stuff of which Phoebeans are built is like ice, but it is of a more exotic variety—Watt and his peers call it anti-ice. The tremendous energy of a Phoebean is somehow stored in the anti-ice—as energy is stored in your own muscles. And when you melt the ice, all that energy is released, in a flash. It's as well for Watt that he first experimented only on a tiny crab." She eyed me. "Perhaps you can see how this is relevant to the problem of firing the Cylinder into the air."

I nodded, and glanced down uneasily at the wooden bulkhead. "There are Phoebeans down there."

"There will be, on the day of the launch. Clutches of young crabs will be loaded in, before they have a chance to grow. The crew will turn these wheels to drive a spring piston down onto the crabs, crushing them in a sort of funnel. Then a flintlock mechanism—Watt will give you the details—will cause an oil fire to blaze, and the anti-ice fragments will immediately melt. The detonation chamber is ingeniously shaped. The expanding gases will be thrust from a nozzle. The ship will be blown into the air—"

"Like a Congreve rocket."

"Exactly that. The crew will be protected by the spring under this platform. It will last only seconds—but when it is done, the Cylinder will already be hurled beyond the air, and en route to Mars!" She studied me. "You seem uneasy. It has all been tested, on smaller models—Watt is sure of his design."

"No doubt. But the wretched Phoebean chicks will not enjoy the experience."

Again she took my hand. "I have suffered the same doubts, dear Ben. But my father says there is a sort of justice in using the Phoebeans' own lethal energy agin them. There is much to be done to make the rest of this unwieldy vessel work—and little time. My father wants to launch in seven days."

I thought that over. "On Boxing Day!"

"The Cylinder must be lofted and away before the Ogre can get his hands on her,

and use this technology for his own purposes. You see why you must help us, Ben. With Fulton gone, you are perhaps the only man in the world who knows how to build a vessel to submerge in the sea—and here we are striving to build a ship that can be submerged in Space!" She released my hand and drew back. "Oh, we can keep you here by force, but you cannot be compelled to work. It is your choice."

And I considered that choice. In the middle of the Napoleonic invasion, I was probably as safe here as anywhere in England, at least for now. And I could see at a glance that without my intervention Cuddy and his wretched crew would not survive the launch to see the top of the air, let alone to view the strange landscapes of Mars. Besides, I am an engineer; I enjoyed defining novel problems and solving them—and what was more novel than this?

And here was Anne, staring at me almost hungrily.

I took her hands now. "If you will look on me forgivingly—if you will promise to speak to me daily—then I will stay, dear Miss Collingwood." And perhaps, a cunning side of my mind considered, I might win more than that if I impressed her.

But dear Anne suspected nothing of this base calculation. [Yes, *I did*.—A.C.] She flung herself at me and hugged me. "Oh, thank you, Ben! Thank you! I must tell my father!"

#### XIV

**S**o began one of the stranger weeks of my life—though what is to follow will surely be much stranger still!

Encouraged by my tentative contract with Anne—a man must have a dream!—I threw myself with a will into the design of the Cylinder. I found myself profoundly dissatisfied, and demanded a list of changes before the shot could be fired, beginning with that ludicrous hatch. Watt's concern was his precious anti-ice rocket chamber, so my area of expertise and his overlapped but little, and he gave me my head; but many of his juniors protested loud and long at my meddling. But I stood my ground, pointing out it was futile to ask my advice if it wasn't to be acted upon, and I won all these petty wars.

I checked over the design of the water filtering system, such as it was; I wouldn't have been keen to sup it myself, but simple calculations and measurements showed that it ought to be sufficient to provide potable water daily for three people, with a little excess for washing. The air that they should breathe, though, was a greater worry. It soon became apparent that virtually no thought had been given to this aspect of the design—perhaps because air cannot be seen we take its provision for granted, but to the engineer of a submersible boat it was the first concern. I immediately set the engineers to making copper bombs, simple spheres of compressed air, of the type I had carried on the *Nautilus*. But even as this work progressed I remained concerned about this issue, and some others, which seemed to me to challenge the viability of the whole enterprise.

While this went on Collingwood was kept informed with the progress of the war. There were daily dispatches from Newcastle, and more irregularly from Edinburgh, to which the King, Pitt, and his government had decamped. Wellesley had indeed made his stand at the ancient Roman fort at Housesteads on the Wall. Though Napoleon had a portion of his force bogged down trying to burn through Newcastle, he pitched his main effort at Housesteads, and over those dying days of the Year Five he threw his men again and again at Wellesley's positions.

The French under the Corsican fight a brutal but effective method of war, with fast marches and dispositions, mass artillery fire, and then an advance of the infantry in

blocks. But Wellesley had come up with a way of countering him. He spread his forces thin along his defensive positions, and you might think he was asking for trouble. But he had the advantage of the higher ground and the cover of the Wall and the ridge it stood on, and every musket in the line he commanded had a line of fire to a Frenchman in his block—every shot counted—whereas the French got in each other's way, and only the front rank could fire back. Wellesley's boys held their fire until they closed, and followed up with spirited bayonet charges. And after several days of destructive stalemate it seemed clear to all observers that Wellesley was holding his own, and was even daring to make forays against the French positions.

Meanwhile, according to a dispatch Collingwood showed me from Edinburgh, the French might have reached their high water mark in their American adventure, too. An army of combined British, Canadian, American, and Indian regiments was striking down the length of Lake Champlain, a deep trench between the mountains that runs a hundred miles south of Montreal toward Albany and New York State. A hot-head of an American general called Jackson, who once fought the British at age thirteen, was making a name for himself as he ran the French positions ragged.

And in the American action—Collingwood himself read me out a passage, but I scarce believed it—the British were experimenting with the use of Phoebeans, big ones culled from the herds in the Canadian Arctic. He even showed me a newspaper sketch of a cavalry officer riding the back of a brute the size of a church, and he had a kind of harness of copper wires and electrical “cells” through which he delivered shocks to the electrical effluvium that controls the beast, and hence goaded it to march this way and that! Well, I had seen something similar in the Channel. I had to puzzle out the meaning of the “cells”—they are the invention of an Alessandro Volta, who has found that if you dip copper and zinc into brine you get a flow of electric—or somesuch!

“Wellesley, you know, is keen to get his hands on such beasts,” Collingwood confided to me. “He saw elephants used in war in India—deuced difficult to control, but deploy them right and they can spread panic. Give me my Elephants of Ice!—so he's said. Well, once the French retreat starts, and if the winter cold lasts, he's sure to have his way. . . .”

He shared this with me in his rather chilly office in the Ulgham installation on the morning of Christmas Eve, only two days before the launch was due. He had called me here, along with Miss Caroline Herschel, who sat bundled up in a heap of blankets. I was glad of the meeting, for my technical concerns remained, and I felt the need to express them to the Admiral. But we shared mugs of hot tea, and sat in battered old armchairs before the fire in the hearth, and his dog slept contentedly at his feet, and old Cuddy seemed in contemplative mood.

“There will be some, though,” he said now, “who will question the morality of exploiting the Phoebeans in war, and indeed as beasts of burden. For they are self-evidently intelligent.”

“Self-evident, is it?” I asked.

“They organized themselves for their first strike on Newcastle, during the Ice War—though some dispute that conclusion. And the naturalists in the Arctic have mapped very complex behaviors, with communities of them clustering around the great queens.”

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"There is also evidence," Caroline Herschel said in her grey Germanic, "of swarming and clustering in the concentration on Mars, though it is at the limit of visibility. And evidence, from an examination of astronomical records, that the comet that delivered the first Phoebeans here in the year 1720 was not a random visitor, but may have been directed to make a close approach—presumably by Phoebean activity."

Collingwood said, "They tell me it's not an intelligence of our sort—or of a dog's or cat's or monkey's. An individual Phoebean seems to be a dumb brute. It's when they get together that the cleverness emerges, rather as ants in a hive, themselves stupid, are capable of great feats of organization. It's all rather exciting, philosophically, even if the Phoebeans pose a threat to us. *We are not alone*, under God; there are other minds than ours. But what sort of minds? Can we ever speak to them? What kind of heaven do they imagine?"

"A cold one," I suggested.

"And what of their philosophies? The younger set today are in a ferment over liberty and rights and whatnot, and I suppose they have a point. But what can our observations of Phoebean society tell us of the nature of liberty, eh? Can a Phoebean ever be free—any more than an ant can?"

"Interesting questions though these may be for future generations," I said gently, "perhaps we should turn to the more urgent matter of the launch of the Cylinder—in two days! There are a number of issues—"

"The foremost of which," he said gently, "is the crew." He really was an impressive man when he turned those glass-blue eyes on you. "As you know, I will travel myself. I could scarce delegate such a mission to any other commander—though it will be the smallest crew I ever ran! I am far from in perfect health, but my rheumatism should not be a hindrance when floating around in the air, and I dare say my intellect and my eyesight are as keen as ever they were. After so long at sea I can double on most tasks—I could even serve as surgeon if there's a toothache or two. . . ."

"Perhaps that is the easier part of the selection."

He permitted himself a small smile. He turned to Caroline Herschel. "Madam, there is the question of your brother—for he, Hobbes, was scheduled to serve as our Inter-planetary navigator. Oh, I can certainly take the readings, for the Cylinder will be a steadier ship than most I've served on. But the calculations are a matter of geometry in three dimensions that would tax my brain; it is more akin to evaluating planetary orbits than courses on the ocean. We need an astronomer! And who better than William Herschel, discoverer of a planet? That was the plan. Indeed the navigation table was designed for his use."

"Let us be more precise," said Caroline. "I designed it for his use. As I compiled the various astronomical, mathematical, and other tables he would need to carry out the task."

"Herschel should have been here, you know, Hobbes. That was the plan. He knew it! Oh, I've heard there have been sightings of the man in Birmingham, where he met with his Lunar Society friends. I have sent missive after missive—"

"Won't come," Caroline said, and she sat plump in her chair, a cheerless bonnet on her head, her rather delicate hands folded in her lap. "My brother will wait until the Cylinder is launched, or exploded. Then he will emerge from nowhere and claim all the credit. Well, let him have it. For he will soon discover that without me to make his observations for him, his fame will evaporate like dew." *[I cannot tell if this is a calumny on William by a frustrated sister, or a valid reflection on his character. I am inclined to the former view, and to guess at a similarity with the Hobbes-Fulton relationship. I leave the question to other biographers. In any case, as the author records, my father proceeded quickly to the nub of the lady's remarks.—A.C.]*

"And why, madam," Collingwood asked, "is he to lose your support so suddenly?"

She snorted. "Do not be coy, Admiral. It does not suit. This meeting of yours is a press-gang, is it not?" She cackled. "I will serve as your navigator. I am younger than William, and will eat less, and am more able than him, and more to the point I am *here*."

"It will be a mission of the most extraordinary danger—"

"I am in danger is this world, with the Ogre on the loose. Decision made. Discussion over. Proceed to the next item." And she looked starkly at me.

Suddenly I understood why I was here. I held up my hands and made to stand. "Oh, no."

"Hear me out, Benjamin," said Cuddy. "Please! Sit and listen. I would not set to sea without a ship's carpenter, and a blacksmith and a sailmaker. . . . There's not a ship been built yet that doesn't need running repairs, and that's even if she doesn't run into a war. And yon Cylinder is as experimental a vessel as has been launched since Moses took to the Nile in a bulrush crib. I need an engineer, Ben."

"Then take Watt. Or Trevithick, or Wilkinson—"

"Once we are aloft—if we get aloft—their work will be done, the anti-ice expended. No, Ben, I need a man to run the inner systems of the ship. To keep the air contained and fresh, to keep us warm or cool—"

"It would have been Fulton."

"And Fulton longed to go—to become one of the immortals, Ben! But Fulton is dead. And so I turn to you. What choice do I have? But I have seen your work, this last week. You're a better engineer than Fulton, I daresay—"

"There's not much doubt about that!"

"—and a better man than you yourself believe. There's none I'd sooner have travel with me to Mars than thee. No," he said, holding up his hands. "Don't speak now. Let it stew the night. Think of all you have to gain—the wonders you will see, the unending fame attached to your name—you'll probably get a knighthood like your ancestor, if it's legal!"

"And you will offer me the hand of Anne, I suppose?"

But he was a gentleman, and he recoiled at that unseemly remark. "That would be Anne's choice, not mine." [*Thank you, Papa.—A.C.*]

"You try to recruit me. Yet you have not told me the full truth of the mission, have you?"

He inclined his head. "Indeed not. Ask your questions, sir."

"I have concerns about the breathing. You have read my reports. I have ordered the loading of bombs of compressed air. But I cannot see how a practical cargo of bombs, without filling up the hull and stringing 'em along behind, could get you more than halfway to Mars and back! I have worked the numbers. I am sorry to return a negative report, but that's how it is."

Collingwood glanced at Caroline, and I thought she smiled. "And your other issues?"

I had them and I listed them, and I won't bore you with them here—save one, the most critical, which was my inability to discern any apparatus that would return the crew to the safety of the ground of Earth *after* its scouting mission among the planets. "Is there to be a Montgolfier balloon stuffed in that cone on the nose, perhaps?"

He said gravely, "Good questions. And certainly you deserve to know the true nature of the mission—and I haven't told it yet, even though I've asked for your commitment. *Then* you will understand why a ship half-full of your air bombs will be quite enough, and why a means of landing on the Earth again is scarce relevant. . . . But you must give me your word that whether you come with us or stay on the ground, you will not breathe a word of it to Anne until after the launch, for she knows nothing of it. Is that clear?"

Confused, disturbed, I nodded. "My word."

"Very well." And there, in that shabby office, on a cold Christmas Eve, he revealed to me at last the full truth.

Miss Caroline Herschel was apparently dozing in her chair. But when he was done she started awake. "A press-ganging! Hee hee!"

[*I cannot recall my father so distrusting me before. O Papa, you could have told me!*—A.C.]

## XV

It is Christmas Day—today! And I never spent a stranger one, and I daresay I never will.

"We must give her a name," says Anne, and the roaring fire in Watt's office gives her cheeks a pretty glow. "Papa, you can't send a ship off into the sea of Space with no better name than the Cylinder!"

We are making a Christmas of it, as best we can; here am I, Anne, Collingwood, Miss Herschel—and Watt and Trevithick and Wilkinson and Denham, and a host of other fellows, and the young women from the offices and drafting rooms, and the dog begs for scraps from the table. Yes, today we are a sort of family, and Anne has organized the chattering girls to deck the room with cut-up silk and gold paper, and big tables meant for the inspection of blueprints groan under the weight of cold pies and hunks of brawn and chicken, and there is port, too, and sherry. When I ask her how she acquired all this provision, she says she went and robbed it from the French at Housesteads, and I wouldn't be surprised if she did.

And if I look through the windows I can see down into the Phoebean pit, where the crabs scuttle and the anti-ice eggs lie dormant in the straw, and you could almost think it a Bethlehem scene.

"A name?" says Collingwood. "I had rather thought of calling her after the *Badger*, my first command."

"Oh, Papa, what a dull choice!"

"And what would you suggest, my dear?"

"How about the Ogre?" Watt says in his Edinburgh brogue, and his friends laugh, raucous.

"Or the Wellesley?" ventures Trevithick.

"Well, that would do," says Anne, "but there are other sorts of hero. How about the Tom Paine?"

And Collingwood sputtered into his cup. "That rabble-rouser?"

"Oh, come," says Watt, "be a sport, Admiral. After all, are we not striking a blow for the freedom of all mankind from the tyranny of the Phoebeans?"

And then begins another of their interminable discussions on the nature of the Phoebeans. Collingwood picks a ship's biscuit from a plate. "Are the weevils in this biscuit free? Are they a democracy? Do they vote on the best course of action, and mount revolutions and coups, even as I—" He takes a big gruesome bite out of it.

They laugh, and on the talk goes.

And I sit, my glass in hand, as close to Anne as decorum allows. I am half facing the wall of windows that fronts the office, overlooking the Phoebean nest, and so I see her twice, the girl before me, and reflected in the windows behind. She has her pretty dress on for the day, her London dress. I never saw a fairer sight—and nor will I again, if I choose to climb aboard the HMS *Tom Paine* with Collingwood and Caroline Herschel, for my view will be full of old and sagging flesh, wobbling around in the strange conditions of Space!

Yes, I am still wrestling with my decision. Wisely, the Admiral is not pressing me.



I have the feeling that he will go to Mars with or without me, perhaps with some poor soul such as Watt to take my place. But the Hobbes-Fulton systems [*another correction, from Fulton-Hobbes!—A.C.*] need running, and nobody else could do it; without me the mission will fail—and Collingwood will go anyway! Can I let him die for nothing?—and Miss Herschel, come to that. And can I allow a world to come to pass in which such as Anne must live under the ice boot of the Phoebeans?—if people survive at all. These are the issues. And yet, and yet—I want to live! As I gaze on Anne (and, to her gentle credit, she lets me) I wrestle with the rights and wrongs of it, the pros and cons.

And it is because I look on her, and on the windows behind her, that I happen to be the first to see the assassin. He must have crawled along the track outside the office, under the window ledge and out of sight. Now he raises himself up—and I recognize him, for it is of course Gourdon, who has followed me all the way here from the deck of the *Indomitable* that night in the Channel—and he aims his musket.

I stand, and cover my face with my sleeve, and hurl myself at the wall.

Falling amid splintering glass and broken frames, I collide with the Frenchman, grabbing his arms, and the two of us tumble back into the pit. We land hard, for it must be six or seven feet deep, and I hear Phoebean crabs slither out of the way, and his musket goes off with a crack. I hear voices raised in alarm above me, and somebody screams.

My universe, from spanning Inter-planetary Space, is suddenly reduced to the smallest of dimensions—me, and the Frenchman under me. I pin his arms back. I smell the wine on his breath, and see pox scars on his nose, and—that odd, repulsive detail!—smears of burgoo porridge and bread crumbs on the filthy ponytail. “You don’t give up,” I say to him in French.

“Never, you sack of shit,” he says to me. “I was flogged for failing to catch you at Stockton! My mission was abandoned as we closed with Wellesley’s forces. But I am not here for France. I am here for myself, American.” He is bigger than me, and stronger, and more determined, and now he begins to force his arms down, and I find myself being lifted, unable to hold him. He will kill me and others in the next seconds, unless I act.

I let go one arm. He pushes back more easily now, mouth open, laughing. But I have a free hand, and I scramble in the straw, and my fingers close on a smooth lump of ice—an egg, a Phoebean egg. I take this egg and ram it into his mouth. It is big, but it jams in there, and now I push my hand under his jaw to keep it closed, I push and push. He claws my wrist and gurgles, and his eyes bulge as he chokes.

But it is not the suffocating that kills him. It is the detonation as the egg bursts, prompted by his body’s warmth, shattering into pieces that would later reassemble into a crab. The glass-hard shards burst from his cheeks and skewer his tongue, and lance up through his throat into his brain.

He twitches and falls back, and blood and ice spews from his mouth. I let him go and pull back, kneeling over him, drenched in his gore. Now they are here, Collingwood and Denham and the rest. Collingwood pulls me off the man and to my feet, while Denham takes his musket and checks he is dead.

And here is Anne, dear Anne at my side, clutching me despite the blood that will soak her London dress. “Oh, Ben! I thought you had sacrificed yourself. You saved us—my father—you saved us all!”

“As you have saved me,” I say to her, and my voice is raw. Her beloved face swims before me. “Make me a promise,” I say. “That when I bring your father safe home from Mars—you will marry me.”

And she answers me with a kiss, into which I fall like a comet.



## Epilogue

To this account I might add the personal details that my father packed a bag of acorns, so that Mars might grow oak trees with which to build English warships in the future. And that his final words before he sealed the hull of the Paine, which I heard myself, were these: "Now, gentlemen, let us do something today which the world will talk of hereafter." And so it will.

I need not recount the events of the mission of the Tom Paine here. Suffice to say that in the months that followed a world at war watched through the eyes of the astronomers—including William Herschel, who was remarkably ever-present once his sister had consigned herself to the dark—as that brave spark followed step by step the course my father had designed, and yet kept secret from me. Glinting in Space, its cannon sparking, the Paine arrowed at Mars—and, in a remarkable feat of navigation by Miss Herschel, plunged through the thin Martian air and rammed that crawling nest of Phoebeans. The anti-ice explosion was bright enough to be seen by the naked eye on this world, a man-made star in the sky.

It was no scouting mission. There had never been an intention to loop around Mars and return to the earth—as I, had I been a grain more technical, should have deduced. Rather, it was a bold Nelsonian gesture that ended the life of cautious Cuddy Collingwood.

And nor need I summarize the events of the war on Earth, as they unfolded after that strange Christmas. Geordie's Wall in England, and Manhattan in the Americas, did indeed prove the limits of Napoleon's ambition in the Atlantic realm. Napoleon is not done; at time of writing he has raised a new "Grande Armee" and has marched east, to confront the continental powers. Perhaps it will be the land that will defeat him, or the people—or the Phoebeans, for the Russians have approached the English over importing ice beasts from Canada to be loosed in their own Arctic wastes. Defeated he will be, I am sure—but his like will surely rise again in the future, as will the Phoebeans, despite my father's brave enforcement of the ice line. The worlds turn, and bring problems for generations to come, that are the same and yet different.

But this account is not of Napoleon or any Phoebean, but of Ben Hobbes. He must have scribbled the last pages in the dark, during that feverish, sleepless Christmas night after the French assassin was killed. Only now, with hindsight, can I understand the warmth that came into my father's clear eyes when we announced our engagement to the company! But that dear moment was the end of our story, not the beginning.

So I sit in our home in Morpeth, with Bounce at my feet who looks up at every footstep, pining for his master after all these long years. I wonder how it would have turned out if somehow Ben could have returned to Earth, and to my arms. If, if! Such speculations are futile, for this is the only world we have, and it is up to us to make the best of it we can—as Ben Hobbes did, and my own Papa, and it is a consolation to me that they were together at the end, for I loved them both.

—A.C. O

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# NEXT ISSUE

## MARCH ISSUE

Our March issue features three new novelettes by genre talents both recent and established. The first, **William Preston's** subtle and affecting "Helping Them Take the Old Man Down," may strike some fans of the grand pulp era as oddly familiar. Whether or not you're already conversant in the ways of super-science and mystical vigilantes, you will find much food for thought in this tale of a larger-than-life hero unwillingly brought back down to earth by one of his former associates. I won't ruin the surprise of the story's origins, but we feel this will be considered one of the best SF tales this year. Next you'll find a powerful story by **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**, this time set within *two* historical periods, as an intrepid band of time travelers from the future venture back to Merry Olde England on an historial mission using risky technology that could strand them back in time—and, of course, certain members of the team cannot not be trusted anywhere near "The Tower." **Alexander Jablovkov** returns with a tale of gene-modded animals drastically changed to live in a world where the way of nature is most assuredly secondary to the instant gratification of its humans in "Blind Cat Dance."

## ALSO IN MARCH

Everyone remembers that being a teen wasn't easy no matter where you lived—even if some adults seem pleased to live their lives like adolescents. In **Benjamin Crowell's** latest, "Centaurs," we find teens in a harsh environment expected to behave like adults; will they still have time to act their own age amid all the hardships? New talent **Derek Zumsteg's** latest for us features an unlikely member of the human race acting as diplomat to alien tourists; his title describes it better than I can: "Ticket Inspector Gliden Becomes the First Martyr of the Glorious Human Uprising"; and **Will Ludwigen**, making a fine *Asimov's* debut, considers "The Speed of Dreams" from the viewpoint of a rather precocious eighth grader.

## OUR EXCITING FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg's** Reflections column offers invaluable insight into the art of writing in "Showing and Telling"; **James Patrick Kelly** considers the true cost of "The Price of Free" in "On the Net"; **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of poetry you're sure to enjoy. Look for our March issue on sale at your newsstand on January 26, 2010. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—in classy and elegant paper format or those new-fangled downloadable varieties, by visiting us online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com). We're also available on *Amazon.com's* Kindle!

## COMING SOON

new stories by **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**, **Stephen Baxter**, **Pamela Sargent**, **Robert Reed**, **Tom Purdom**, **Allen M. Steele**, **Anna Tambour**, **Chris Beckett**, **Steven Popkes**, **Molly Gloss**, **Sara Genge**, **Peter Friend**, **Barry B. Longyear**, and many others!

**THE LAST THEOREM**

by Arthur C. Clarke

and Frederik Pohl

Del Rey, \$15.00 (tp)

ISBN: 978-0-345-4023-2

**T**wo of the field's pioneers join forces for a near-future story built around Ranjit Subramanian, a Sri Lankan mathematical genius.

Math isn't the usual stuff of an SF story, although there's no inherent reason it shouldn't be. Certainly Fermat's last theorem, from which the novel takes its title and the initial impulse that drives the plot, is in its broad essence comprehensible to anyone who's taken the first few steps in geometry. (It states that while there are pairs of perfect squares that can be added together to create a third perfect square, the same is not true for any higher powers; Fermat, a seventeenth century French mathematician, claimed to have a proof of this, but never published it.) A proof of the theorem was published in the mid-1990s, but it was long and complex, and could only be checked by a computer. In short, it lacks the elegance and simplicity mathematicians crave. It is almost certainly not the proof Fermat claimed to have had—if he ever had one at all.

In the novel, drafted by Clarke and completed by Pohl before Clarke's death, Ranjit, the sixteen-year-old son of a Hindu monk, comes across Fermat's claim and becomes obsessed with proving it. After a series of adolescent adventures goes wrong, he is imprisoned. There, given time to concentrate on the problem, he succeeds—and upon being freed, immediately publishes it. Almost against his will, he becomes a hot property, invited to speak to learned societies, to give TV interviews and to accept honorary degrees.

He has also become of interest to high-level political players, including a former school friend whose father is a UN official. And while their interest makes his life much more comfortable for a while, it also raises moral issues that bother him a great deal. The lessons his father taught—even though Ranjit is for all practical purposes irreligious—stick with him.

Meanwhile, far from Earth, an intelligent race known as the super-Galactics is planning the extermination of human beings, whom they see as a long-range threat to the order of the universe. They send their operatives—a coalition of less powerful races—to do the job. But while they are in transit, the UN finally develops *Pax Per Fidem*—a brutally simple means to neutralize threats to peace on our own planet. The larger plot of the novel revolves around the tension between the approaching coalition and the progress of the human effort toward solving its own problems, against which broad background the life of Ranjit and his family plays out.

While much of the overall shape of the book is clearly Clarke's doing, Pohl's hand is evident all through it. In fact, the book has several of the favorite themes of both authors. Clarke's love of Sri Lanka, and his advocacy of space elevators as a means to overcome the high cost of putting people and materials into orbit is here, as is Pohl's expert exploration of hard-nosed political maneuvering; and both authors' fascination with alien races far advanced beyond human achievement. Those conversant with both men's work will spot other familiar bits, as well—often in the form of little in-jokes for those long-time readers.

The plot is no barnburner. Most readers likely to pick this book up won't be expecting one, in any case; slam-bang ac-

tion was never Clarke's stock in trade, and Pohl's work, while edgier, has always had a cerebral turn as well. There are enough twists here to keep the reader guessing, and while the conclusion of the main plot can be seen coming a ways off, it's satisfactory nevertheless.

Clarke's death in 2008 means that this is likely to be one of the last books he took an active part in. Pohl is still with us, and seems likely to keep on writing his four pages a day as long as he can lift a pencil. But this will be their only collaboration, as Pohl makes clear in an afterword. Anyone who has enjoyed their work in the past should give this one a read.

### THE EDGE OF REASON

By Melinda Snodgrass

Tor, \$24.95 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-7653-1516-8

Subtitled "A Novel of the War Between Science and Superstition," this latest by Snodgrass sets a weird cosmic battle of supernatural forces against a realistically drawn urban landscape.

The plot begins with a teenage girl, Rhiana Davinovitch, running through the center of Albuquerque, unknown pursuers closing in on her. Also on her trail is a young cop, Richard Oort, trying to trace the cause of a string of electrical outages in the city. He finds Rhianna surrounded by three attackers and rushes to her aid, discovering in the process that the attackers are not men but monsters. Then, while he is still trying to figure out what to do, Rhianna casts a spell and shatters one of the creatures. The battle ends with the appearance of a homeless man, who says he's been sent to save Rhianna—but then says that she should stay with Richard, because she's invisible to her pursuers as long as she's with him.

The weirdness builds from there. Snodgrass puts her troubled protagonist, Oort, in a web of political intrigue sufficiently grounded in reality so that the supernatural elements seem plausible. But more is at stake than mere political power. Richard and Rhianna learn they are

pawns in an eons-old conflict between the Old Ones, godlike creatures that seek to control human minds and hearts, and the Lumina, a group dedicated to freeing us from oppression. On the one hand are the powers of religion and magic, on the other science and rationalism.

Richard finds himself torn both ways. Like many policemen, he has a strong religious faith. To learn that all religion—not just the dark pagan rituals he's been taught to think of as satanic—is bent on oppressing humans is a hard lesson to confront. But events work to convince him that real hope lies with the Lumina, and he throws himself into the fight.

Snodgrass effectively connects her Lovecraft-like dark fantasy plot to real issues in today's world, with strong conflict and well-drawn characters. Worth looking for.

### ZOE'S TALE

By John Scalzi

Tor, \$24.95 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-7653-1698-1

Scalzi's latest in the "Old Man's War" universe is a retelling of the plot of his 2007 novel *The Last Colony* from the point of view of the protagonist's adopted teenage daughter, Zoe.

Zoe is a fairly typical smart-mouthed kid, with most of the usual preoccupations and problems. But she also comes with an unusual pair of companions: two aliens named Hickory and Dickory (names she gave them). Members of the Obin species, they are of the first generation of their people to have individual consciousness, a quality bestowed upon them by Zoe's father. She is therefore, in effect, an object of worship to the entire race—a status that brings nearly as many problems as benefits.

Zoe's parents have been chosen as leaders of the new human colony on a planet named Roanoke—a colony established in spite of a ban on further colonization by a powerful coalition of alien races. And while a significant degree of secrecy has been maintained in its founding and set-

tlement, the colony is clearly a fat, inviting target for the coalition to attack.

Having been brought up in a context of interplanetary warfare and Machiavellian political games, Zoe is well aware of the larger currents swirling around her new home—most of them, at least. She's also intent on having whatever semblance of a normal growing-up she can manage. Her first move when the colonists begin to meet one another is to put together a group of friends her own age, and she fairly quickly starts working to turn the younger generation into a cohesive group. Whether instinctive or calculated, it works.

The larger plot elements are familiar to anyone who's read *The Last Colony*, and I'll avoid rehashing them for anyone who hasn't already read either book. Nonetheless, the idea of taking a second tour over this same territory undoubtedly made writing this book an interesting challenge to Scalzi, over and above the job of creating a convincing first-person narrator who happens to be a teenaged girl. (Those tempted to detect echoes of Heinlein's Podkayne are probably barking up exactly the right tree.) Scalzi has also said that he wanted the opportunity to fix a couple of plot holes in the original telling of the story that had begun to bother him. On the whole, the new viewpoint gives the story more than enough novelty to make it work on its own.

Whether or not he comes back to this particular future history, Scalzi's "Old Man's War" series has won him a good number of loyal fans, and to judge from the fact that it was chosen for the 2008 final Hugo ballot, this book appears to have given them a good dose of what they enjoy. What's next on his agenda remains to be seen—but odds are it'll be worth reading.

## STRANGE ROADS

By Peter S. Beagle

DreamHaven, \$15.00 (chapbook)

ISBN: 978-1-892058-10-2

Three short stories based on artwork by Lisa Snellings-Clark make up this short

collection issued in a limited edition by the Minneapolis bookstore, Dreamhaven.

While each of the stories is undeniably fantasy, they have quite different settings and tones. The first, "King Pelles the Sure," takes place in a small kingdom, surrounded by powerful neighbors; the king, desirous of glory, gets his advisor to start a war. He thinks the war will be short and victorious, with a minimum of carnage. Not surprisingly, he is wrong on all counts.

The second tale, "Spook," is set in a modern apartment building in a Mediterranean country. It involves a ghost that has decided that one of the characters is responsible for its death. If there is to be any peace, the ghost must be banished.

Finally, Beagle turns to 1950s New York for "Uncle Chaim and Aunt Rifke and the Angel," the story of an immigrant Jewish artist visited by an angel. The story is told by the artist's nephew, a young boy who doesn't entirely understand everything that's going on but who is perceptive enough to make the story's final breakthrough.

All three stories blend serious subject matter—tragedy, death, moral responsibility—with a comic tone, most evident in the dialogue—which in the latter two stories is characterized by the characters' deadpan acceptance of the supernatural intrusions into their world. Beagle's touch is sure; whether he is working in the quasi-mythical fantasy kingdoms or the vanished New York of half a century ago, the characters sound like real people, getting through as best they can even when their dreams are exploded.

*Strange Roads* is published in an edition of a thousand copies. DreamHaven Books can be reached on the Web at [www.dreamhavenbooks.com](http://www.dreamhavenbooks.com).

## ODD AND THE FROST GIANTS

By Neil Gaiman;

illustrations by Brett Helquist

Harper, \$ 11.99 (tp)

ISBN: 978-0-06-167173-9

Gaiman, who won a Hugo for his recent YA novel "The Graveyard Book," turns to

Norse mythology with this tale of a young boy caught up in the war of the Aesir and the Frost Giants. Once again he shows clearly that writing for young readers needn't mean stripping the story of anything that might interest adults.

The novel begins in a small Norse village, where Odd is a young boy without a clear place in the larger society. His father has been lost during a raid, so he has no older man to teach him the ways of the community. On top of that, he is lame—the result of a tree he was attempting to fell landing on his foot. And if his own bad luck were not enough, what seems an endless winter has fallen on the land. That last detail should be enough to orient readers familiar with the sagas; the danger of the last days is upon the world. And, of course, Odd turns out to be the only one able to turn things right.

The tale itself begins when Odd finds himself in the company of three strange animals: a fox, a bear, and a one-eyed eagle. When Odd discovers that they can talk, he gets them to reveal their identities. They are, as knowledgeable readers will have guessed, the gods Loki, Thor, and Odin in animal form, exiled from their home in Asgard after a trick by one of the Frost Giants.

The story develops in authentic style from there, with each of the gods taking on his characteristic attributes. To cut to the chase, Odd overcomes the Frost Giant in a game of wits, and wins back Asgard for the gods. Gaiman gives the flavor of Norse tale-telling without a heavy load of background material, and the story moves smoothly to its foreordained conclusion, with the world put right again and Odd rewarded for his courage and cleverness.

Helquist, who is best known for his illustrations of Lemony Snicket's improbable adventures, gives the characters and scenes a visual presence that adds to the tale.

Enjoyable myth-retelling for younger readers, with enough depth and wit to keep any of Gaiman's grown-up audience interested as well.

## TALES FROM OUTER SUBURBIA

Written and illustrated by

Shaun Tan

Scholastic, \$19.99 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-545-05587-1

Australian artist/storyteller Tan made a huge impression with his wordless story, *The Arrival*, portraying the life of an immigrant trying to make enough of a living to bring over the family he left behind in the Old Country. But while the theme is the stuff of mainstream fiction, the world of the story brims over with fantastic creatures and odd social institutions—all portrayed with a virtuoso graphic hand.

Here, he takes a somewhat more conventional approach—if that term applies to anything he does—combining prose stories with quirky art. The tales here cover a remarkable range, with the only common element being a suburban setting. But these suburbs are only superficially like the ones familiar to us; walking down one of Tan's streets, one is likely to meet a water buffalo or a suited deep-sea diver. In the backyards, there may be ballistic missiles. Just beyond the next block, there may be an enormous chasm. And a visit from an alien can leave a family with a curious set of mementoes.

Some stories are largely illustrated prose, although such a description short-changes the power of the art. Tan's illustrations bring the quirky subject matter into the visual realm with wit and precision. Many of them are little stories—or little jokes—in and of themselves. Sometimes the art comments on the story, as at the end of "Eric," the story of a small alien visitor that is summed up by a final display of what Eric has left behind; or the final illustration of "Our Expedition."

In other stories, the visual presentation is a large part of the overall effect. In "The Amnesia Machine," the tale is presented in the form of a newspaper story, with bits of other features (sudoku answers, a crossword puzzle, some sort of table of numbers) spread around the edges and a straight-faced picture taking up half the

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page. Others appear to be bits of torn-up paper with words or phrases strewn together in an order that adds up to a coherent tale.

The artwork takes on even more power in the stories that are told largely through images. While none are quite as thoroughly wordless as *The Arrival*, there are points—as in the middle of

"Grandpa's Story"—where Tan stops depending on language and just lets the pictures go to work for a few pages.

The incidental art on the end pages and the table of contents (just for two examples) is a delight as well. You can buy this book for the kids in your family, but be sure to get hold of an extra copy for your own enjoyment. ○



# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

hope to meet Asimovians at Arisia near Boston, over the MLK Day weekend. RustyCon is also a good bet. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

## DECEMBER 2009

31—MEWCon. For info, write: 4570 S. Mueller Dr, #H-305, Beaverton OR 97007. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) [mewcon.com](http://mewcon.com). (E-mail) [info@mewcon.com](mailto:info@mewcon.com). Con will be held in: Vancouver WA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Red Lion at the Quay. Guests will include: R. Axelrod, Sachibelle, M. Hopcroft. "Manga/Exotic Worlds."

## JANUARY 2010

1-3—Ikkicon. [ikkicon.com](http://ikkicon.com). [info@ikkicon.com](mailto:info@ikkicon.com). Hilton, Austin TX. Anime.

8-10—Anime Los Angeles. [animelosangeles.com](http://animelosangeles.com). LAX Marriott. B. Feiner, J. Gaona, K. Hevert, T. Tomomatsu, Spooky Bards.

8-10—IchibanCon. Great Wolf Lodge and Resort, Concord NC. Vic Mignona. Anime.

15-17—RustyCon. [rustycon.com](http://rustycon.com). SeaTac Marriott. James P. Blaylock, Theresa Mather, D.-G. Anderson. SF/fantasy.

15-17—DarkCon. (602) 430-3413. [darkcon.org](http://darkcon.org). Grace Inn, Phoenix AZ. Martin Klebba, John Wick. Fantasy, SF, gaming.

15-17—DeCONpression, 5765 Cairo Rd., Westerville OH 43081. [decompression.org](http://decompression.org). Doubletree, Columbus OH. Relaxacon.

15-18—Arisia, Box 391596, Cambridge MA 02139. [arisia.org](http://arisia.org). Hyatt. Dozois, Clemens, Tokar, Roche, Trembley. SF/fantasy.

16-17—SetsuCon, Penn State, 240 HUB, Robeson Center, Univ. Park PA 16802. Days Inn, State College PA. Anime.

29-31—VeriCon, H/R SF Assn., 4 Univ. Hall, Cambridge MA 02138. [vericon.org](http://vericon.org). Harvard Univ. Comics and gaming.

29-31—ConJour, c/o U. of Houston Clear Lake, 2700 Bay Area Blvd., Houston TX 77058. [conjour.net](http://conjour.net). SF/fantasy.

29-31—OhayoCon. [ohayocon.org](http://ohayocon.org). [godai@centaurstage.com](mailto:godai@centaurstage.com). Hyatt Regency Hotel, Columbus OH. Anime.

## FEBRUARY 2010

5-7—GeneriCon. [genericon.org](http://genericon.org). Rensselaer Univ., Troy NY. General SF and fantasy.

5-7—SuperCon, 601 Palace Ave., St. Paul MN 55102. [supercon.info](http://supercon.info). Brentwood Courtyard, Rochester MN. Relaxacon.

5-7—AggieCon, Cepheid Variable (958460), Box 5688, College Station TX 77844. (979) 268-3068. [aggiecon.tamu.edu](http://aggiecon.tamu.edu).

6-7—EvilleCon. [evillecon.com](http://evillecon.com). Downtown Executive Inn, Evansville IN (near Louisville KY). Anime.

6-7—G-Anime. [ganime.ca](http://ganime.ca). Palais des Congrès, Gatineau QC. Reding, Bonneau, Kyowa Quebec, La Brigade SNWI. Anime.

11-14—CapriCon, 126 E. Wing #244, Arlington Hts. IL 60004. [capricon.org](http://capricon.org). Westin, Wheeling (Chicago) IL. Fred Pohl.

12-14—Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 623-2311. [boskone.org](http://boskone.org). Boston MA. A. Reynolds, John Picacio.

12-14—ConDFW, 750 S. Main #14, Keller TX 76248. [www.condfw.org](http://www.condfw.org). Dallas TX. Jack McDevitt, Elizabeth Moon.

12-14—Farpoint, 11708 Troy Ct., Waldorf MD 20601. (410) 579-1257. Timonium (Baltimore) MD. Furlan, David. Media SF.

12-14—KatsuCon, Box 3354, Crofton MD 21114. [katsucon.org](http://katsucon.org). Gaylord National Resort, Nat'l Harbor (near DC). Anime.

19-21—ConNooga, 5251-C Hwy. 153, #280, Hixson TN 37343. [connooga.com](http://connooga.com). Chattanooga TN. "Multi-fandom."

19-21—Gallifrey, Box 8022, Los Angeles CA 91406. [gallifreyone.com](http://gallifreyone.com). LAX Marriott. Peter Davison. Dr. Who.

19-21—Naka-Kon, Box 442640, Lawrence KS 66044. [naka-kon.com](http://naka-kon.com). Hyatt, Kansas City MO. A. Belcher, C. Patton. Anime.

19-21—Furry Fiesta. [furryfiesta.org](http://furryfiesta.org). Addison (Dallas area) TX. Anthropomorphics/furries.

26-28—SheVaCon, Box 416, Verona VA 24482. [shevacon.org](http://shevacon.org). Holiday Inn Tanglewood, Roanoke VA. S. Hickman, Spati.

## AUGUST 2010

5-8—ReConStruction, Box 31706, Raleigh NC 27612. [reconstructionsf.org](http://reconstructionsf.org). The North American SF Convention. \$95.

## SEPTEMBER 2010

2-6—Aussiecon 4, GPO Box 1212, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia. [aussiecon4.org.au](http://aussiecon4.org.au). World SF Convention. US\$225.

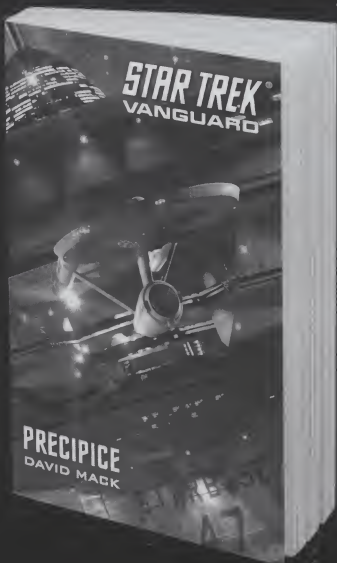
## AUGUST 2011

17-21—RenoVation, Box 13278, Portland OR 97213. [rcfl.org](http://rcfl.org). Reno NV. Asher, Brown, Powers, Vallejo. WorldCon. \$140.

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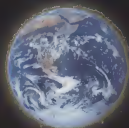
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